Yellow River floods. Flooding and changes in the river's course which took out the most fertile areas, causing famine and peasant revolt, occurred in 1166–68, 1171–77, 1180, 1182, 1186 and 1187. Emperor Shih-Tsung did his best with relief operations but in the political chaos after his death in 1189 the Jin administration simply could not deal with the Yellow River as well.[57] In 1194 the river burst its dykes, flooded Shandong province and then found a new route to the sea taking it south of the peninsula, bringing on widespread famine at the very moment the central government was hit by a financial crisis. Confidence in the financial system crashed when the Jin administration failed to redeem the paper money it had issued and circulated as cash. It followed that all relief operations would have to be conducted in gold and silver, but it was precisely the shortage of these precious metals that led the Jin to issue paper money in the first place.[58]

From the turn of the century, then, the Jin empire was beset by a number of simultaneous crises: flooding of the Yellow River, a financial collapse, weak emperors, a disputed succession, the dubious loyalty of Khitans and other key elements of the military, corrupt officialdom and increasing external threats, especially from the hitherto underrated Mongols. Genghis was always lucky in the timing of his wars with other external powers, and this time was no exception, especially as some historians speculate that all Asian societies dependent on agriculture were in decline at the very same time: the Jin, the Song, Khwarezmia, the Tangut, Qara Khitai.[59] It was boom time for nomadic warriors.

At this very juncture the Song chose to launch a war of revanchism. They crossed the Yellow River in 1204 but were heavily defeated. Jin emperor Chang-Tsung (reigned 1189–1208) proved conclusively that, for all their problems, the Jin were no paper tiger militarily. In 1206 145,000 Jin troops forced their way across the Yangtse, again defeated the Song and forced them to sue for peace. The Jin terms were harsh. First they demanded the head of Han T'o-Chou (c. 1151–1207), the minister who had led the Song party, and got it. Then they exacted an enormously increased tribute. The treaty of 1208 stipulated that the Song must pay annually 340,000 ounces of silver and 250,000 bolts of silk, as agreed in the original treaty of 1165, *plus* an indemnity of 390,000 ounces of silver. Additionally, they had to cede a number of towns in the Huai valley and recognise the suzerainty of the Jin emperor.[60]

But any advantage the Jin gained from this victory was soon wiped

out by internal turmoil. In 1207 the Khitans engineered a great revolt in the north, in which the *juyin* joined. The Jin had hoped to build a new frontier wall in the north, to be garrisoned partly by their own troops and partly by the Tangut. But once the Khitan rising broke out, virtually all elements in the far north joined the insurrection: Tangut, *juyin*, and the Jin's own demobilised and dissatisfied troops.[61] Behind the scenes, stoking the fires, was Genghis Khan. The Mongols and the Khitans had developed a close rapport. They spoke related languages, had very similar cultures, maintained close political connections and were invaluable interpreters of events inside China. They also agreed that they faced a huge potential threat if, instead of their futile wars with the Song, the Jin decided to wage all-out war on the steppes.[62]

Khitans from China had begun to defect to the Mongols as early as the late 1190s. Yelu Ahai had been sent as Jin envoy to Genghis and was so impressed by what he saw that he immediately offered him his services. First he returned to China and brought back his brother Tuka as a hostage to guarantee his sincerity. Genghis waived this, took Tuka into his bodyguard and enrolled Yelu Ahai as one of his advisers. Yelu, forced to abandon his wife and children to the mercies of the Jin – who promptly imprisoned them – went on to a distinguished career with the Mongols. Both brothers were present at the Baljuna covenant, Ahai commanded troops in the campaigns against the Tangut and finally, in 1211, was given a senior position in the advance guard for the Chinese invasion under Jebe.[63] But these Khitan recruits were not the only renegades from the Jin. In 1208 four native Chinese, senior Jin officials, fled to the Mongols and endorsed Yelu Ahai's constantly rehearsed mantra that the Jin were highly vulnerable.[64]

Although Genghis had decided on a war of conquest with the Jin empire as early as 1206, he proceeded warily, where a lesser leader might have rushed his fences in the belief that the Jin were beset by so many different problems that they had already reached the end of the road. Even with all the considerable advantages the Khitan revolt and the internal turmoil in the Jin empire handed him, he waited until the famine of 1210–11 had bitten deeply before he crossed the Chinese frontier. Although it was true that he was 'a bold outsider, somebody who stood just on the fringe of power and was willing to take desperate chances to seize decisive power,'[65] Genghis was more chess player than gambler. Preconditions for a successful venture were the hobbling of the Tangut so that there would be no danger of a flank attack (achieved in the campaign of 1209–11), the submission of the Uighurs (achieved by the obeisance of his favourite, the *idiqut*) and the loyalty of the Ongud.

This last item was problematical, for after Alaqush's assassination a power vacuum opened up and Genghis could not be sure his sons would follow in their father's political footsteps and support the Mongols. To hasten this end he used his favourite ploy of political matches and – as we have seen – married his daughter Alaqai Beki, Alaqush's widow, to the Ongud chief's successor (and his successor in turn).[66]

Having to his own satisfaction secured his power base on the steppes and ensured that no tribes in his rear would rebel while he was in China, at the beginning of 1211 he called a great quriltai on the banks of the river Kerulen to inform his inner circle and close allies of his general thinking, his grand strategy and the tactical details of the battles he expected them to win. Present were the *idiqut* Barshuq and Arslan, khan of the Qarluqs.[67]

It is unlikely that he confided to them his particular animus towards the new Jin emperor, but his closest associates would already have been aware of it. Prince Shao of Wei, a leading Jin oligarch, had attended the 1206 quriltai when Temujin was acclaimed Genghis Khan, but Genghis had found him stiff, overbearing and, from his viewpoint, insolent and insufficiently deferential. The next meeting with the Prince of Wei came two years later after Genghis announced he would no longer be paying tribute to the Jin. The prince again made the long journey north and did not enhance his credit with the khan by an overlegalistic insistence that the Mongols had a treaty obligation to pay, since they had conquered the Kereit, who originally owed the tribute. Genghis waved this away as the ravings of a man who did not understand power.[68] On his way home the prince learned that emperor Chang-Tsung had died and he had been chosen to succeed. He took the title of emperor Wan-yen Yung-chi with an official succession date of 27 December 1208.

When Genghis heard who the new emperor was, he guffawed with derision. Whereas previously his contempt had been implicit, he now sent a message which made it overt. 'How can the Jin choose a man like the Prince of Wei as their ruler? He is an imbecile.'[69] This open declaration, which Genghis hoped and expected would be relayed to the new emperor, crossed with a further fatuous 'demand' from the former Prince of Wei. Seemingly having learned nothing on his two visits to the Mongols, he capped his folly by sending an envoy to Genghis asking him to kowtow as a sign of fealty. The Mongols threw the luckless ambassador out, but not before sending a further insulting message to Wan-yen Yung-chi – which the envoy dared not repeat on his return to court.[70]

Addressing the quriltai, Genghis worked down from grand strategy to minute particulars. He explained that he intended to conquer China but at the same time maintain his power base on the steppes; not to do so was the great mistake previous invaders of China (including the Khitan Liao and the Jurchen Jin) had made. His ultimate aim was an empire that embraced both China and central Asia.[71] He emphasised the powerful support the Mongols enjoyed from Muslim and Uighur merchants, who wanted to see him as the superpower in the East. Sea trade had, since about the year 1200, become precarious, because of a war between the states of Kish and Ormuz, each trying to deny the Persian Gulf to any ship that traded with the other side. Meanwhile Chinese competition (both Song and Jin) was becoming increasingly strong on the eastern lanes of the sea route. Consequently trade routes had become a matter of considerable importance to the merchants.[72] The Islamic merchants of western Asia had also been won over to the Mongols by a simple stratagem: when Chinese merchants tried to rack their prices up, Genghis simply ordered their goods seized and confiscated. Taking his cue from this, a Muslim merchant made Genghis a present of the goods he was hoping to sell. On his departure he found his camels laden with gold and silver. From this arose a new definition of trade: travellers from the west of Asia gave the khan lavish gifts, and then waited to see how Genghis rewarded them when they left.[73] In addition to all this, the invaluable information Genghis gained from all sectors of the mercantile class meant Mongol intelligence was far in advance of anything the Jin could manage.

He then outlined all the Jin weaknesses adumbrated above. Yet he warned his listeners that the coming campaign would be no walkover. The Jin were formidable military opponents. Unlike many other enemies, they believed in *guerre à outrance* (they would fight to the bitter end), whereas intelligent people knew enough to submit, become client states and enjoy local autonomy. It is hard not to believe that Genghis nodded approvingly in the direction of his favourite, the idiqut at this point.[74]

He proceeded to military matters. It was true that the number of Jin subjects eligible for military service was above six million and that their standing army was 500,000 strong in infantry, with another 120,000 mounted bowmen; additionally they had several supposedly impregnable fortresses.[75] But these formidable statistics masked any number of enemy weaknesses. The disparity in numbers could be reduced to insignificance by the Mongols' greater mobility; could the Jin archers really fire five arrows accurately and then ride out of range, as the Mongols could? To match the talent of the Mongol archers it was not enough just to put men on horses and give them bows and arrows; it was something for which you had to be trained from birth. And the mobilisation of Mongol warriors did not harm the economic efficiency of nomadic peoples as it harmed that of agriculturalists; it was very expensive for the Jin state to train cavalry but for the Mongols it was a way of life.[76] The Mongols were naturally equipped for war. Their normal ponies could double as cavalry mounts. They did not have to buy warhorses separately and then have them ridden by specially trained cavalrymen. The Mongols' primary weapon, the bow, was used all the time for hunting. The cattle and sheep they drove would solve all commissariat problems, and meanwhile it was known that China was being devastated by severe famine. Nor was there any hardship for the Mongol women and children in being camp followers, whereas for sedentary societies this was impossible.[77] Finally, he urged his followers to be ruthless and have no sympathy for the Jin; it had to be remembered that these were the people who had tried to exterminate the Mongol nation, especially during the years 1135–47 and 1162–89.[78]

Genghis then sent an advance force south under Jebe to ensure that the Ongud were ready for his advent. The Jin emperor responded by sending an army north to intercept him, but his generals had no stomach for a march into the Gobi, and instead spent their time looting Ongud tribes near the Great Wall. Jebe came on this disorganised rabble and quickly routed it, prompting any ditherers among the Ongud and the *juyin* to throw their lot in definitively with the Mongols.[79] Wan-yen Yung-chi responded to these setbacks by clapping various generals and advisers in jail, but for the most part remained stupefied by the 'contumacy' of the Mongols and incredulous that they should be attempting such an impossible mission. He was hamstrung by cultural conditioning according to which the nomadic barbarians were beneath his dignity. He still thought he was easily strong enough to see off Genghis and his hordes but as yet had seen nothing of the speed, striking power, organisation, discipline and tactics of his opponent.[80]

Meanwhile Genghis ascended the sacred mountain of Burqan Qaldun to confer with Tengerri while all Mongol families endured a three-day fast below. He removed his cap and threw his belt over his shoulder in the traditional gesture of submission to the deity. He then genuflected nine times and offered the ritual libation of koumiss before virtually going into a cataleptic trance for seventy-two hours. On the fourth day he came down to announce that God had promised him victory.[81]

He knew very well that he was taking a great risk in invading China, for if he was badly defeated there, a kind of nuclear reaction would take place right through his empire, with all the recently conquered peoples rising up to throw off the Mongol yoke and his infant empire reduced to the insignificant tribe of his father's era.[82] Very careful preparations had been made to ensure the most efficient logistical and commissariat structures. Genghis probably set out for China with around 110,000 troops, to which he hoped to add anything from 10–20,000 Ongud auxiliaries, depending on his estimate of hostile risings in his rear.[83]

Such a force required at least 300,000 horses, all needing water and forage. Tens of thousands of sheep and cattle would accompany them to provide meat, and for transporting the effects and impedimenta of war they would use camels and ox-drawn two-wheeled carts. Even so, there would have to be careful rationing and husbanding of resources. Fortunately, the Mongols had long been inured to travelling vast distances on what for normal people would be inadequate food. Crossing the Gobi was the major obstacle, as there were limited wells and waterholes. Genghis therefore cleverly timed his offensive to avoid a shortage. He knew that during the early spring the normally exiguous water supply was greatly augmented by melting snow which collected in clay troughs and hillocks. He had already sent scouts to all parts of the Gobi and they had meticulously charted all the possible crossing routes, making special note of the best places for water and grazing.[84]

Genghis left Temuge in charge of the empire, with his Ongud son-in-law Toquchar as his second-in-command, in charge of a force of 20,000 men, with a roving brief to proceed at once to any trouble spots in the Mongol rear. He divided his army into western and eastern detachments and then subdivided the larger eastern unit so as to ease the pressure on water and food supplies. The two eastern units jumped off from the River Kerulen in March 1211. Genghis commanded the main force, with Tolui as his deputy and Muqali as his commander of the left wing. On his left and to the east was another force under Jebe, Subedei and Qasar. Muqali, a man of imposing mien and stature, an excellent archer and war planner, was already one of the 'four steeds' but was now emerging as Genghis's favourite general.[85] The westward detachment, commanded by the three princes Jochi, Chagatai and Ogodei, started from the River Tula and its target was the fortress of Chung-chou, about fifty miles north of the Yellow River at the point where it turns steeply south to complete the inverted horseshoe. This army struck due south before veering south-easterly to enter China at the extreme western edge of Ongud territory.

It must be stressed how vital was the Ongud role in the entire operation. A Turkic people, like the Kereit, Naiman and Merkit they were Nestorian Christians. Their vast territory stretched all the way from north of the Ordos loop along the line of the present-day Great Wall to the land of the Ongirrad in the east.[86] Their adherence gave Genghis easy access to the Jin empire, which would otherwise have been difficult to penetrate, protected as it was on its western side by Hsi-Hsia and the Yellow River, on the north-east by thick forests and on the east by the sea. During March and April the two armies marched along parallel lines in a south-easterly direction, about 230 miles apart, with the princes' force having to cover slightly more ground (about 530 miles as against the main force's 500). Despite the apparently huge gap between Genghis and his eldest sons, he was in constant touch with them via a relay of fast post horses; the two forces could reunite in a maximum of forty-eight hours.[87]

The princes struck into the western Gobi but encountered no opposition. At this time of the year the desert was at its most hospitable, and the spring season threw into sensuous relief the alternating habitat

of yellow sand dunes, salt flats, clay ravines, saline lakes and low bushes. The princes reached Chung Chou in May and took it easily. While awaiting the expected Jin counter-attack but learning from Genghis that the enemy had as yet made no move westward, Jochi, Ogodei and Chagatai competed by sending out parties to chart the Ordos loop and the northern and eastern frontiers of Hsi-Hsia (it will be remembered that the Mongol campaign against the Tangut in 1209 had been launched from the Tula against the western part of their realm). These expeditions explored the western loess highlands directly north of the horseshoe bend of the Huang He – an intricate landscape with 45-foot sand dunes and thin forest thickets along the water margins; the vegetation was scrub and grassland, broken up by sand dunes and belts of sand and clay, with occasional trees: wormwood, Siberian pear-trees, liquorice root plants.[88] In the Ordos Desert the Mongols were even able to supplement their food supply, for the alkaline soil allowed sheep and goats to thrive. It was also a great resource for Mongolian wild horses, wild asses, Bactrian camels and even snow leopards.[89]

Meanwhile in May the columns of Genghis and Jebe reached the Jin walls, marking the boundary of China. These fortifications have to be distinguished from the later Great Wall, which did not exist in its entirety as a continuous structure until the Ming era (i.e. after 1368). Completed around 1200, they were built to the north of Peking in two parallel lines. Since they were not linked up to form a continuous chain, the Mongols simply bypassed them. In any case, these fortifications were manned by the *juyin*, the very people who rebelled the second the Mongols invaded.[90]

Genghis began by raiding the land between these walls and the Gobi, hoping to tempt the Jin into giving battle on terrain favourable to the Mongols. But at first the much-maligned emperor Wan-yen Yung-chi boxed clever. He freed his imprisoned generals and put them in command of two large armies. He sent the army commander of the North-West to talk peace terms with Genghis, whether genuinely or simply as a stalling tactic it is difficult to tell; in any case the talks got nowhere. And he sent other commanders to strengthen the mountain fortifications leading to the most important cities in the eastern part of his realm.[91] The two Jin armies at first achieved some success and temporarily halted the threatened Mongol-Khitan alliance by discouraging major defections.

Seeing the enemy refuse to take the bait of pitched battle, Genghis decided to force the issue by penetrating deeper into Chinese territory, even if this meant fighting on the Jin's terms. His forces quickly overran the static Jin positions trying to hold a fixed line – always a chimerical project on the frontier.[92] Yet the two main Chinese armies remained intact. It quickly became clear that Jin strategy was to ignore the princes on the western frontier entirely. Their commanders' reasoning was that if the main force under Genghis himself was defeated, the princes would have to scuttle back to Mongolia immediately or risk disaster themselves. The Jin split their own forces and assigned one of the two armies to threaten the Mongol right flank; this force would also be in a position to intercept the princes in the valley of the upper Yang if they marched east.

To counter this, Genghis decided to take out the smaller army first so that there would be no menace on his flank when he engaged the larger force.[93] This task he gave to Jebe who, with Subedei, had already performed brilliantly by capturing their first two targets, the fortresses of Huan-chou and Ta-shui-luan. From the latter place Jebe marched due west, behind Genghis and cutting across his previous line of march, and came upon the smaller force, absurdly complacent and following the emperor's orders to reinforce the fortress at Wu-Sha Pao. Jebe swept down upon them like a whirlwind, took them by surprise and routed them, thus at a stroke removing the threat to Genghis's right flank. Jebe demolished the fortifications and moved on to Wei-Ning, where the governor panicked, left his post, shinned down the walls on a rope and came to offer his services to the Mongols. He was sent back to persuade the town to surrender, which it promptly did. Jebe rewarded him for this by making him a roving commissar, tasked with persuading other towns in the region to capitulate. Jebe then rejoined Genghis at Fu-chou in late August, just in time to take part in the storming of yet another fortress.[94]

Outwitted and with one army defeated, the Jin instead laid plans to lure Genghis deeper into Shanxi province. The traditional gateway from Mongolia to China was through two defiles, one the so-called Wild Fox Ridge (ten miles north-west of Chang-chia-k'ou and fifteen miles north-east of Wan-Chuan), the other called the Badger's Snout.[95] Here the general Chih-Chung, a veteran of the Song war in 1206–07, prepared his army, confident that vast numerical superiority would

tell in locations where the Mongols did not have room to manoeuvre. It was true that his total forces outnumbered the Mongols almost ten to one, but the problem with Chinese armies was that non-combatants, workmen and camp followers outnumbered the actual fighting men by four to one.[96] Jurchens and Khitans largely provided the cavalry arm with Chinese peasants forming the infantry. The effective tally of the Jin host was therefore about 100,000. Chih-Chung sent an envoy to Genghis, ostensibly to parley but really to lull the Mongols by intimating a weakness he did not feel; as so often with Jin emissaries, the man instantly defected and revealed the Jin tactics.

The story goes that the details of the surprise attack planned by Chih-Chung were revealed to Genghis halfway through a meal break, and that he immediately ordered his men to stop eating and form up.[97] But Genghis was only pretending to be fooled. Advancing at dawn, he chose a spot where Jin numbers would not tell and they would have little room to manoeuvre. Chih-Chung took the bait and offered battle. Genghis relied on firepower, directing the most devastating fusillade of arrows on the Chinese ranks. Muqali then delivered a lightning attack in two waves, with Genghis's guard in the second.[98] Forced back by the sheer impetus of the charge, the Jin cavalry ended up trampling its own infantry. Soon the army dissolved into chaos, panic and rout. By noon Genghis had won a complete victory. Closely pursued by the Mongols, the Jin took terrible losses.[99] Finally, at Hui-ho Pao, thirty miles from the Badger's Snout battlefield, Chih-Chung made contact with his brother general, the one already defeated by Jebe. Together they rallied their forces and made a stand, hoping that since the Mongols had ridden so far from the Badger's Snout, they would be exhausted and thus easy pickings. Alas for their hopes, they were once again heavily defeated. Chih-Chiung fled with the survivors to the Sang-Kan River, where he was joined by a strong force of Jurchen horsemen. Next morning this combined force made another stand and gave a good account of themselves in a battle that lasted all day.[100] Finally the Jin cracked and fled, the Mongols once again hard on their heels. Chih-Chung, unaccustomed to this kind of warfare, where a victorious enemy did not stop to enjoy the spoils but pressed on with the goal of total annihilation, became both enraged and paranoid, convinced by now that the emperor had not given him enough support. When he reached Lai-Shui Hsien he had the town magistrate flogged in a fit of frustrated rage. Getting fresh horses, he rode on into the wilderness, with the Mongols still dogging him. By now he was convinced he was on his own, and decided that thenceforth he would take orders from no one and fight on as a guerrilla chief.[101]

The three pitched battles fought in September 1211 destroyed the Jin as a credible battlefield force; henceforth they would fight a war of attrition. It is difficult to convey the extent of the Chinese losses, but nine years later travellers reported the fields of carnage still covered with bleached bones.[102] The worst aspect of the triple defeat for the Jin was that it encouraged widespread revolt. In this respect the conduct of the Jin envoy sent to Genghis was typical. Held in the Mongol camp until after the first battle, he then confided to Genghis that he had always wanted to join the Mongols and volunteering for the dangerous task of emissary was the only way he could think of to achieve this end.[103]

At the imperial court Chih-Chung was widely blamed for the debacle. It was said that he was too timid, that he should have attacked the Mongols with cavalry alone much earlier while they were still pillaging, but that he insisted on fighting with both cavalry and infantry on the field. The victory at Hui-ho Pao delivered not just the eponymous town but a string of others: T'ien Ch'eng, Hsuan-Ping, Pai-teng Ch'eng, Te-Hsing Chou. Such was Mongol confidence that they even made an attack on Hsi-Ching (modern Datong) from the rear, though this was unsuccessful.[104] Even so, the Mongols were in possession of two of the three strongest cities in the north. Finally Genghis ordered Jebe to take Chu-yung chuan, a fortified pass at the southern end of which was Nankou, just twenty-five miles from Peking (then called Zhongdu or Chung-Tu).[105]

Jebe found the town much too strong to be taken by assault so played the time-honoured Mongol card: the feigned retreat. All along the fifteen-mile pass were fortresses perched on steep slopes. At news of Jebe's retreat they all sallied out, eager to be in at the kill. Jebe led them on a wild-goose chase for thirty-five miles, stretching them out so that the various detachments of pursuers lost touch with each other. Then he turned and demolished them piecemeal, spreading a contagious panic that in the end led the defenders of Chu-yung chuan to surrender meekly to the Mongols. As one unit was attacked, the

Jin would send reinforcements which in turn were eaten up. It was said that the corpses piled up like felled trees.[106]

Early in November Genghis and the main army marched down the pass and pitched camp twenty miles from Peking, accepting as he went the surrender of three other important fortresses (Wei Ch'uan, Chin-shan, Ch'ang-ping) which had all given up the ghost after the fall of Chu-yung chuan. He sent Jebe ahead to probe the defences of Peking itself. As a final cap to his great triumphs of 1211 he received word that Yelu Ahai had put the result of any future pitched battles beyond doubt. In a daring raid Yelu seized the imperial stud and its horses and pastures, hobbling the Jin cavalry arm beyond hope of recovery. The raid also provided the Mongols with tens of thousands of fresh mounts, used to Chinese conditions. This was particularly important as the soil of China largely lacked the selenium Mongol steeds needed.[107]

Meanwhile the emperor Wei Shao Wang was almost catatonic with mixed rage and depression as the litany of defeats was chanted to him daily. He put Peking under martial law and forbade all men of military age to leave the city under pain of death. His own inclination was to depart for the southern capital of Kaifeng, but the commander of the Imperial Guard persuaded him to stay, after promising that the Guard would fight to the last man. This was proved to be more than hot air when 5,000 of them repelled Jebe's vanguard when they appeared outside the city. The repulse earned the emperor a reprieve, for Genghis concluded that an attack on Peking would be premature and recalled Jebe.[108]

The emperor was right to be despondent, for 1211 was the only year in which the Jin could have defeated the Mongols, but he had himself to blame for the inept response to the threat from the north. So incredulous was he at the Mongol invasion that he did not even bother to call out the militia.[109] In little more than six months he had massively lost credibility. His advisers whispered behind his back, remembering how he had claimed the Mongols were so exhausted by their war against the Tangut that they could easily be rolled up. Another of his boasts that came back to haunt him was allegedly contained in a letter to Genghis: 'Our empire is like the sea; yours is but a handful of sand.'[110] His counsellors piled on the agony, reminding him of the physical hardihood of the Mongols, how they could cook without fires, go for days without food, mobilise and coordinate magically, as if they had just one brain like an ant colony.[111]

To make matters worse, the Tangut were so disgusted by Wei Shao Wang's rejection of their plea for help at the time of their own invasion by the Mongols that they raided Jin China in September 1210 and remained in a state of war with them until 1225. Moreover, no great military talent had emerged from the Jin, whereas the Mongols possessed at least three captains of genius – Muqali, Jebe and Subedei – and younger commanders were making a name for themselves: the Tangut Chaghan, Genghis's adopted son; and the two Khitan brothers, Yelu Ahai and Tuka.[112]

It soon became clear that the Jin reputation for military talent was largely built on their victories over the Song, not primarily a martial nation. And even apart from his prowess on the battlefield, Genghis had outpointed the Jin emperor at every level. His superior skill in exploiting the national, social and religious rifts in the enemy ranks was just one example, another being the generous treatment he gave defectors, unless they had broken a personal oath to a lord. On the other hand, although pitched battles were invariably lost, the war itself might still be won by the Jin. The Mongols lacked the manpower to garrison all the fortresses they took, they were anyway deficient in siegecraft, and even Genghis's usual policy of wholesale massacre – slaughtering everyone, soldiers, civilians, prisoners – made little impact as the population of China was so enormous.[113] When the Mongols withdrew for a winter break in December 1211, staggering back to Mongolia laden with booty, the Jin promptly regained most of the fallen fortresses.

If 1211 had been a year of unalloyed triumph for the Mongols, 1212 was anticlimactic. It began well. Liu Po-lin, the governor who had quit his post earlier by rope ladder, had by this time inveigled for himself a post as one of Genghis's key advisers. He cleverly suggested a campaign in the far north-east, in Manchuria, in hopes of igniting a general Khitan rebellion; the specific target would be the capture of the city of Liaoyang. This was more than two hundred miles farther east than the Mongols were currently operating. Although Genghis's favourite fighting general and battlefield tactician was Muqali, it was to Jebe that he always turned if he needed a daring long-distance raid. He issued the necessary orders. Jebe set off north of Peking in December 1211, advanced north-east up the coast, crossed the Liao river on ice and arrived outside Liaoyang in January 1212.[114]

Finding the city heavily defended, he feigned panicky flight and left his baggage behind. Sensing a famous victory, the defenders of Liaoyang came out, initially to loot, then to pursue. Jebe left a deceptive trail, which led the Jin scouts to report back that the fleeing Mongols were about a hundred miles ahead (six days' march) heading for Peking. Liaoyang gave itself over to celebration but Jebe, taking advantage of the long winter nights, rode back in twenty-four hours, and swept into Liaoyang before any resistance could be organised.[115] There followed the usual slaughter and thoroughgoing sack of the city, after which Jebe and his men made a leisurely return to the environs of Peking.

As soon as he was safely back, Genghis ordered a withdrawal of all units around Peking and a general pullback to the Jin walls, leaving behind just enough men to guard the principal passes from Mongolia to China.[116] He needed to rest his cavalry and ponder the next step, yet still required an unceasing momentum in China. He therefore ordered the princes to open up their campaign in the west. The trio of Ogodei, Jochi and Chagatai sprang into action. Avoiding the dangerous passes south of the plain of Feng Chou, they swung south, then east to the Hung-ta River, where they divided. One detachment went south to besiege Ning-Pien while the main body went upriver and seized the pass of Sha-hu H'ou, from which they took the cities of Shuo-ping and Hsuan-ning, close to Datong. The princes then reunited for a march through Shaanxi province.[117]

For this enterprise Mongol versatility was needed, as this province was bewilderingly heterogeneous. In the north were portions of the Loess Plateau and the Ordos Desert, in the centre the Qin-ling Mountains bisected the province east–west, while in the south the climate was subtropical; with a large span in latitude Shaanxi accordingly boasted a wide range of microclimates. Here were plenty of the animals the Mongols knew well – deer, antelope, camels, snow leopards – and some that were new to them, such as the giant panda and the snub-nosed monkey.[118]

Genghis meanwhile withdrew to recuperate at Lake Hulun, on the extreme edge of Ongud territory. The Ongud alliance was proving shaky. In the short time Genghis had been in China, there had been an anti-Mongol coup complete with the assassination of two key Genghis supporters. When Genghis returned to the land of the Ongud in early 1212, the putschists fled west to the Ordos. Untypically, he did not choose to pursue them but the Jin did his work for him by apprehending the conspirators' ringleader and executing him. It seems curious that they should have beheaded an anti-Mongol figure, and scholars speculate that there must have been some idea of winning over the pro-Mongol faction to their side. But the Jin spoiled their case by insisting that their sovereignty over the Ongud be retained and recognised; this annoyed the waverers and decided them to stick with the Mongols.[119]

With just the princes now actively campaigning on Chinese soil, this might have seemed the ideal time for the Jin to recoup their losses, and they did indeed reoccupy most of the fortresses which had fallen in 1211. Yet two prime factors prevented them from securing any real advantage from Genghis's temporary withdrawal. In April 1212 northern China was ravaged by one of the worst famines yet – obviously a 'knock-on' effect of the previous year's devastation. The Tangut chose this moment to launch another raid on the Jin. In the same month a seismic revolt of the Khitans took place in Manchuria, headed by Yelu Liuke, who proclaimed himself king of an independent Khitan realm.

Scholars dispute the origins of this insurrection. Some say it was a manifestation owing little to the Mongols, that the Jin provoked it by sending an army of occupation to Manchuria to intimidate the Khitans, and that the heavy-handedness of the Chinese general triggered a spontaneous uprising.[120] Others, more plausibly, claim that Genghis's long game with the Khitans finally paid off, and that one of the aims of Jebe's incursion into Manchuria was to encourage just such a rebellion.[121]

Separated from Mongolia by the Khingan Mountains in the north and the Jehol range in the south (in the gap between them the great Asian steppe rolls on), thirteenth-century Manchuria was divided into four distinct zones: the sinicised Lower Liao River, important for agriculture; the gap between the two mountain ranges, home to pastoral nomads; the dense forests bordering Korea and Siberia inhabited by villagers running a mixed economy of agriculture and stockbreeding (including pigs – an animal never found among pastoral nomads); and the community of fishermen and hunters in the far north. Despite the severe winters, it was a rich and populous, multicultural land.[122] The Khitan revolt opened the prospect of installing a Mongol vassal there who would relieve them of the need to conduct sustained campaigns of conquest against bitter resistance, as in Jin China. To rule such a land Genghis needed a strong man who could amalgamate the various cultures, and Yelu seemed to fit the bill. To detach this enormous territory from the Jurchens would be a lethal blow to the Jin empire. Its importance can be gauged by just one fact: immediately before Yelu's revolt the Jin brought a reinforcement of 20,000 cavalry from Manchuria to shore up the defences of Peking.[123]

Not surprisingly, the Jin were not prepared to take the loss of Manchuria lying down and immediately dispatched a strong army against Yelu. Encouraged by his earlier contacts with Jebe, Yelu appealed to Genghis for help. To show the importance of the alliance he contemplated, Genghis sent Shigi Qutuqu on an embassy, together with Anchar Noyan, the younger brother of Borte. The story goes that the two Mongol envoys virtually collided with Yelu on the road somewhere in the vicinity of modern Changchun in central Manchuria. Yelu pledged that he would be a loyal ally of the Mongols and largely kept his word. He told the envoys that the Jin had certainly received their last cavalry reinforcement from Manchuria but stressed the need for Mongol assistance, especially since Manchuria was so difficult to mobilise, with the northern hunting and fishing tribes such as the Solons largely apathetic.[124] Anchar secured from Genghis a small force of 3,000 but, together with the Khitans, this was easily enough to rout the Jin army. After the victory Yelu, a good politician, shrewdly sent the enemy's baggage and effects to Genghis who, delighted with the gesture, gave Yelu the title of Liao Wang (prince of Liao).[125]

In the early autumn Genghis returned to China and resumed his campaign, certain that the Jin would be weakened by the widespread famine, and especially that of June 1212 in the provinces of Shanxi and Shaanxi. This time his aim was twofold: to link with his three sons in the west and take Datong, and to achieve permanent occupation of the area in the extreme north of China just inside the Jin walls. Genghis had chafed at the 'waste' of manpower involved in this latter operation but it was, objectively, an advance in sophistication and probably owed much to the advice of clever renegades like Liu Po-lin.

The 'intramural' operation was to be directed by Tolui, assisted by Genghis's adopted son Chaghan.[126] Genghis himself, accompanied by Liu Po-lin and another wily defector named Kuo Pao-yu, turned west and, in coordination with the three older princes, converged on the still defiant Datong. This time Genghis was confident, for defectors had revealed to him many of the secrets of siegecraft, and his artillery park had all the latest mangonels and trebuchets. In October the siege began. A relieving force under a 'new blood' young general tried to take him in the flank but was lured into a narrow valley by a feigned retreat and slaughtered mercilessly.[127] Returning to the siege, Genghis was hit by an arrow shot from the walls and severely wounded. He broke off the siege and the army retreated north.[128]

Meanwhile Tolui had defeated a small force of 3,000 Jin and taken the city of Te-Hsing Chou with great difficulty, then abandoned it to join his father, whereupon the Jin reoccupied it. With both armies having failed to match the brilliant achievements of the year before, the campaign of 1212 was a disappointment, but the wounding of Genghis probably accounted for much of the failure. The only true positive for the Mongols was that they were slowly mastering siegecraft, and the Jin failure outside Datong meant that even the most sanguine among them largely abandoned the idea of confronting the Mongols in pitched battles.[129]

Even if the relatively dim showing of the Mongols that year gave the Jin some hope, at least three major factors militated against optimism. The realm continued to be racked by famine, with vast quantities of food having to be sent from Kaifeng and the lower Yellow River to the northern provinces; as a result of the Mongol incursion Shaanxi even suffered a second grievous famine. By now manpower shortages were becoming so acute that hardened criminals were being pardoned and released from jail on condition that they served in the army. There were more and more rebellions in the empire, and not just that of Yelu, who had so grown in confidence by the end of the year that he declared himself emperor Liao Wang; the Tangut had invaded both Gansu and Shaanxi provinces and captured a number of towns.[130]

After a long winter rest at the Dolon Nor oasis just north of the Jin walls, Genghis returned to China in 1213 for his third campaign. He invested the city of Te-Hsing and took it in less than a month. Muqali took the Jin's northern capital after a forty-day siege. The Jin seemed unable to accept the obvious, that they could never defeat the Mongols on a formal battlefield, for they once again tried their luck against the cream of the Mongol army. At Wei Chu'an they sustained another sanguinary defeat. The Jin drew up in their usual manner, infantry in the centre, cavalry on the wings. The Mongol mounted bowmen duly devastated the infantry with an arrow shower, which decimated the conscript army, formed of reluctant peasants. Finding the enemy centre still not inclined to buckle, Genghis ordered a massed charge. Forced to withdraw under the impact of this thunderbolt, the Jin reached more open ground where Tolui was able to take it in the flanks. On both sides the Mongol cavalry worked their way along ridges above the valley before descending on the rear and flanks, having 'appeared from nowhere'. It was said that the bones of the slain formed a white eminence which looked like a hill of snow, and that the ground was greasy and slippery with human fat.[131]

Yet even after this signal triumph Genghis was held up for a month by a stubborn defence at the Chu-yung chuan pass. He turned to his master of such situations, Jebe. A force under Jebe went up the Sang-Kan River and found another pass that would leave the Jin at the Chu-yung chuan high and dry. Genghis then left a solid force to bottle up the defenders of the latter while he hastened to join Jebe. The Jin commander tried to get an army between Jebe and Genghis, but in vain. He arrived to find Jebe and Genghis united, the new pass under their control, and the Mongol army drawn up ready for battle. At sight of this most of the Jin soldiers turned and fled without even making a token effort at hostilities. Genghis then proceeded to take the city of I-chou, and sent Jebe and Subedei by forced marches through the other entrance of the Chu-yung chuan so that they came upon the enemy from the southern end. Caught between those who were bottling them up and this new menace, the starving Jin defenders surrendered.[132]

All these battles and manoeuvres had taken time, so that it was the beginning of November 1213 before Genghis arrived before Cho-chou, some miles south of Peking. He sent a force of 5,000 men to guard all the approaches to Peking and left the siege to Muqali. Yet he was disappointed in the stubborn defiance of the Jin. He sent a Tangut envoy to the emperor outlining peace terms, but these were summarily rejected.

Many of the emperor's advisers thought his intransigence unwise, as it simply led more and more despairing generals and officials to defect to the Mongols. Already forty-six brigades of deserters had been enrolled in Genghis's army.[133] Jin China was rapidly descending into chaos. Countless bands of brigands, cut-throat bandits and self-defence groups arose from the maelstrom, setting themselves up as petty princelings, seizing grain, silk, gold, weapons, women and young boys (as slaves), expropriating houses and property and even taking over whole villages.[134]

While this was going on, dramatic events were taking place in Peking. The irrepressible Chih-Chung, tired of living on the scant pickings of a guerrilla leader, somehow got himself restored to favour with the emperor, was promoted to Vice-Commander of the Empire and given his own praetorian guard of 5,000 men. All this simply increased the arrogance of the never humble Chih, 'an irascible ruffian' in the words of one historian.[135] The emperor had given him these privileges on the strict understanding that he had to remain in the city, but Chih-Chung was determined to show that he and not the emperor was the real power in the land. When an angry emperor sent a messenger to summon him back and give an account of himself, the Vice-Commander simply ignored the summons. He followed this up by luring the city garrison commander for talks and murdering him, 'justifying' the atrocity by claiming that the dead commander had been planning a coup.[136]

His next exploit was breathtakingly audacious. He arrived with his cohorts outside the gates of Peking, claiming that the Mongols were close on his heels. When the guards opened the gates to admit him, his men slew them and proceeded to butcher the imperial guards. After seizing the emperor, on 11 September 1213 Chih-Chung proclaimed himself Regent of the Empire. The very same day he had the emperor murdered. Wei Shao Wang, former Prince of Wei, the seventh of ten Jin emperors and the third to be assassinated, was just forty-five.[137] In his place Chih-Chung appointed a figurehead emperor Hsuan Tsung (reigned 1213–1223) but treated him with contempt and pointedly remained seated in his presence.

At first Chih-Chung seemed to live up to his own propaganda as China's saviour. In November he defeated a Mongol force outside Peking – a feat all the more remarkable as, very ill, he directed operations from a bed placed on a cart. The Mongols returned to the fray next day and

again Chih-Chung was victorious, this time very narrowly. He knew little of Genghis, for in such circumstances the khan was notorious for pressing on until he got the result he wanted. Presumably the first two encounters had not featured his best generals, for on the third day the Mongols won a total and overwhelming victory.[138] Chih-Chung, still ill, had sent out a deputy (general Kao Chi) to fight and had threatened him with death if he lost a battle. The menaced general thought quickly, hurried back to Peking before the news of his defeat reached the city, entered the imperial palace with a picked body of men and marked down his tormentor for destruction. Chih-Chung, surprised in his apartment, tried to escape by climbing over a wall, fell and was badly injured. He was scooped up and immediately beheaded. For a day or two civil war loomed, with Chih-Chung's praetorians angry at being ousted from supreme power. In a surprisingly Solomonic solution the emperor bought them off, pardoned Kao Chi and made him the new Vice-Commander.[139]

With defeats and desertions on all sides, emperor Hsuan Tsung petitioned for peace but included so many qualifications, caveats and escape clauses in his proposals that Genghis rejected the suit contemptuously. He was now convinced that the only way to bring the emperor to heel and face the reality of his situation was a campaign of destruction all the way down to the southern frontier and the lower Yellow River. Leaving 5,000 men to patrol the roads to Peking, he divided his army into four separate forces. Ogodei, Chagatai and Jochi, with Liu Po-lin as guide and political commissar, were to overrun Shanxi province and western Hebei.[140] Qasar, Anchar, with Jurchedei, Bukha of the Ongirrad and Tolub Cherbi as subsidiary commanders, would lay waste the territory between Peking and the Bohai Sea. To his three ace commanders – Muqali, Jebe, Subedei – was assigned the task of the conquest and destruction of eastern Hebei and Shandong provinces. He and Tolui intended to cut a swathe right through the Jin empire to the Yellow River.[141] The campaign of terror thus unleashed would make clear to everyone in north China that they should no longer hope for anything from the Jin emperor. Genghis (correctly) intuited that the Jin were so demoralised that they would remain on the defensive and not try to concentrate all their force against any one of these columns. The Jin had 36,000 armed men inside Peking but they suspected another of Genghis's famous traps – that if they ventured forth against one of these forces, at least one of the others would take them in the flank.

The simplest of these tasks fell to Qasar. After proceeding south-east to Yung-Ping (on the Bohai Sea), he then struck north-east to the Liao River, following Jebe's route a year earlier, and penetrated deep into Manchuria, following, first, the north-easterly course of the Sunggari (Songhua) River, the largest tributary of the mighty Amur. The Sunggari, a meandering stream with myriad oxbow lakes on either bank, was frozen at this time of year. Next he went down the River Nen, the principal tributary of the Sunggari, and followed it due north through the greater and lesser Khingan ranges.[142] Everywhere he went he destroyed Jin towns and fortifications and slaughtered all who remained loyal to the regime. The particular prizes they netted were Chi-chou (modern Ji Xian) east of Peking and I-chou, north-east of modern Jinzhou in southern Manchuria.[143]

The purpose of this epic ride was to show the flag and encourage Yelu and the Khitans to stand firm, but its curiosity was that Genghis had already assigned Manchuria to Qasar, so that he was in effect sending his brother to conquer his own appanage. In any case, this point remained academic, for Qasar died just after the expedition in circumstances not made clear in the sources.[144] There is, however, something of a mystery about Qasar's Manchurian exploits, for he made many claims for which the evidence is tenuous, to say the least. He was said to have plunged into the River Sunggari on his horse when it was in full flood, despite the fact that it was known to be frozen at this season.[145] He was also supposed to have reduced Ning-Chiang on the eastern bank of the river by asking for 10,000 swallows and one thousand cats, tying lighted wool to their tails and then catapulting them over the battlements where they set fire to the town. Unfortunately this is a very old story that goes back in history at least as far as the Vikings, for a similar story is told in the Icelandic saga the *Heimskringla*. The Moors in their wars in Spain were also said to have tied firebrands to the tails of bulls before stampeding them into the enemy. The ultimate source for all such fables seems to have been the biblical tale of Samson tying firebrands to foxes' tails.[146] Nevertheless, the submission of the Solon tribe to him in the Tao-Erh valley is solidly based in history.[147]

Muqali was given senior command over Jebe and Subedei in the

laying waste of Shandong province, once again evincing Genghis's particular regard for him. A peninsula that juts out between the Bohai Sea to the north and the Yellow Sea to the south, 250 miles from north to south and 450 miles east–west, the province is geographically and climatically intricate, with plains, basins, hills, terraces, deltas and even a mountain increasing the complexity. The north and south of the province sinks down to the Yellow River delta, scarcely above sea level (the river has changed course often in history, sometimes debouching to the north of the peninsula, at other times to the south), but the central part of the province, including much of the peninsula, is hilly upland, rising to the 5,000-foot-high Mount Tai in the west. Well apprised as always of all relevant factors, Genghis had avoided the hot, rainy summer monsoon season and sent Muqali there during the long, cool winter, ideal for campaigning. He told him to concentrate on the northern part of the peninsula as he hoped himself to be campaigning in the Yellow River delta.[148] It was reported that Muqali destroyed all the fields of cotton, wheat, maize and sorghum he could find, obedient to the khan's orders. Genghis's attitude was that if the Chinese emperor was prepared to allow his own people to suffer simply to save his own face and assuage his pride, he would make it clear to the Chinese people just how high that price was.

Muqali also destroyed Teng-chou (modern Penglai), famous for its wine, and Cheng-Ching, known for its art treasures and in every respect a beautiful city, full of lakes, parks, silk factories and lotus flowers, also a notable centre of Buddhism.[149] It is also related that he was the first Mongol commander to see the Yellow Sea.

The princes enjoyed the second most spectacular campaign of 1213–14. They raided down the left bank of the Yellow River through Pao-ting and La-an, then turned west at Hua-Ching where the Huang He is joined by its second largest tributary the Fen (about 430 miles long) and almost immediately north into the valley of the Fen. Towns that fell included Ping-yang, Fen-chou and Taiyuan, the wealthy capital of Shanxi province and an important centre for wine-growing and metallurgy; it seems that the inhabitants were taken completely by surprise, since they had the fixed idea that any Mongol army would have to approach them from the north, not the south.[150] Reaching the head of the Fen they proceeded north and sacked the cities of Tai-Chou and Ta-t'ung (Datong). Other important towns and strongholds that fell to the trio of Ogodei, Jochi and Chagatai were Zhengding, Zhaoxian, Tung-ping and Shanqixian. Both Genghis and the princes habitually used prisoners to form the front ranks of their army and act as battering rams, so as to bear the brunt of the casualties. Often the defenders would recognise their relatives among the attackers, refuse to fight them and thus hand the Mongols an easy victory. Groaning under a mountain of plunder, the princes' army rejoined Muqali's host and Genghis and Tolui outside Peking in March 1214.[151]

Genghis and Tolui, in the fourth and largest army, marched almost due south through Hebei and Shanxi provinces directly to the Yellow River and came within hailing distance of the southern Jin capital of Kaifeng. They took Ho-chien but bypassed Chi-nan and Ta-ming on the grounds that these were in Muqali's territory; Jin propaganda said they were too strong for Genghis, but Muqali, as we have seen, had no difficulty in taking Cheng-Ching. The overlapping of Muqali's and Genghis's army in the Shandong peninsula, on the other hand, seems odd and it may be, as some chroniclers have related, that Genghis wanted to see the sea for the first time – which he accomplished by riding down to the shore at Teng-chou at the north-western end of the peninsula.[152]

Genghis's army then proceeded south to the Yellow River, sacking and looting, destroying every village, town and unfortified city he came to, wantonly destroying the crops of rice, millet, sorghum and maize and all the vineyards, either through ignorance of the value of agriculture or, more likely, as part of a scorched-earth policy. With far fewer rivers on the great northern plain of China than elsewhere in the country, travel by horse was easier. It was said that on this long 300-mile ride Genghis and his horsemen took eighty-six towns, sacked them all and left only nine cities uncaptured in the entire area north of the Yellow River. Seven major cities, each with a population of more than 100,000 had been captured.[153] This – if nothing else – testifies to their dramatically increasing sophistication as regards walled cities and siegecraft.[154] On this epic adventure the Mongols also saw, usually at a distance, a plethora of wildlife, including a number of species new to them: the red-crowned crane, great bustard, the golden eagle, the sea eagle, the white stork and black stork, yellow weasel and sika deer, as well as the more familiar tigers, otters, martens, civets, wild boar, foxes, badgers, hares, pheasants, partridges and vultures.[155]

The campaign was notable for lightning strikes and amazing Mongol mobility. Genghis shrewdly bypassed difficult targets like modern Linfen and Taiyuan in Shanxi and concentrated on easier objectives, thereby spreading a reputation for invincibility.[156] By the end of a complex campaign with four separate armies, Genghis and his horsemen had criss-crossed the entire Jin empire in three months. As one historian put it: 'Everywhere north of the Yellow River there could be seen dust and smoke, and the sound of drums rose to heaven.'[157] By the time Genghis reunited with Muqali and his sons north of Peking, they were using vast numbers of captured horses and oxen to drag enormous wagons laden with booty, especially bolts of silk, as well as thousands of young prisoners of both sexes.[158] While maintaining his grip on Peking, Genghis again withdrew for rest and recreation to the Dolon Nor oasis, but not before sending Muqali on another mission.

This time Muqali was sent to an entirely new region, the Liaodong peninsula between the Bohai Sea and Korea Bay, to reinforce the Mongol grip on Manchuria, to stiffen the revolt of Yelu and the Khitans and to build on the work done by Qasar, with whom he had collaborated successfully earlier. He had many talented lieutenants with him (Bukha, Uyer and Shih T'ien-hsiang) but, sadly for him, not his favourite Shih T'ien-ni, whose father had defected to Genghis in 1213 with several thousand men. Intensely loyal to Muqali, he had raised his own regiment of defectors to help his patron. Shih T'ien-ni fell foul of the inveterate plotter general Wu Hsien who, while outwardly submitting to the Mongols, was secretly plotting against them. Shih T'ien-ni snuffed out Wu Hsien's would-be coup and exposed his treachery. Determined on revenge, Wu Hsien actually went to the trouble of inviting his nemesis to a banquet, behaved with scrupulous politeness, then had him ambushed and murdered on his way home.[159]

Muqali swept through the hilly and forested region of the Liaodong peninsula (modern Liaoning province) as far as the Yalu River, the border with Korea. By this time Muqali was used to oceanic vistas, as the peninsula contains 1,300 miles of coastline (about 12 per cent of the Chinese total).[160] In November 1214 he sacked the principal town, Kao Chou, in the north of the province, noting for his report to Genghis that the Liao and the Jin had made his work easier by their massive programmes of deforestation over the previous two centuries.[161] Next he sent Shih T'ien-hsiang to strike due west at the important city of Pei Ching (modern Chifeng) and lay waste all the countryside in a fifty-mile radius; this task was completed by January 1215.

After completing his work on the Liaodong peninsula, Muqali marched north-east, then swung west to join Shih T'ien-hsiang, who had reported Pei Cheng as a very hard nut to crack. Muqali reconnoitred from the south and reunited with Shih, but was forced to agree that even with their combined forces they would waste too much time on a siege of that city. But their presence near Pei Cheng was timely, for the Jin had decided on one last effort in the north and sent an army of 20,000 under general Ing-Sing. Muqali defeated this host at Qoto in March 1215 with great slaughter; 8,000 Chinese troops were left dead on the battleground.[162] The Jin forthwith definitively abandoned their territories in the far north.

Muqali now considered catching up with Qasar, but the mounted relays that operated between them indicated that Qasar had already departed from the Nen River on his homeward journey to Mongolia. Qasar continued up the upper reaches of the Tao-Erh River, over the Khingan Mountains to Khalka Lake and thence to the Kerulen, completing his epic thousand-mile journey in January 1215.[163] Both Qasar and Muqali reported to Genghis that Yelu and the Khitans remained totally loyal, which gratified the khan immensely.[164]

Genghis, always sensitive to heat, withdrew to the Dolon Nor oasis for the summer of 1214 but left Peking tightly bottled up by his armies and to this end retained possession of the 'Chou towns' that encircled the capital (I-chou, Cho-chou, Pa-chou, Chi-chou) and of all important passes whereby the emperor could receive reinforcements. Genghis tried to encourage the emperor to make peace in April, stressing that though his generals were bloodthirsty he wanted a peaceful solution, but talks immediately foundered on the Mongol insistence that Hsuan Tsung relinquish the title of emperor and accept demotion to the level of king.[165] Genghis sent back the following message: 'The whole of Shandong and Hebei is my possession while you have only Peking. God has made you so weak that, were I to molest you further, I don't know what Heaven would say. I am willing to withdraw my army but you must give me something to quell the clamourings of my generals.'[166] He put a trusted counsellor Ja'afur in charge of further negotiations.

An agonised debate took place within the Heavenly City between 'hawks' and 'doves'. The doves' favourite idea was that the emperor should agree a peace and then move his court to Manchuria, where they could mobilise the old tribal loyalties of the Jurchens. It was a measure of the sinicisation of the Jin that this idea was dismissed out of hand. The hawks alleged that the Mongols were exhausted and weakened by disease, so that this was the perfect time to attack. The commander of the Peking garrison, however, tipped the scales by stressing that the morale of his troops was low and their loyalty uncertain: 'If defeated, they will fly like birds and animals; if victorious, they will at once return home to their families, and who will then guard the capital?'[167]

Even as the emperor and his courtiers dithered, word came in that the Song had announced they would no longer pay the tribute agreed in the 1208 treaty. The Song, as prevaricating as their old Jin enemies, could not quite decide whether to ally themselves with the Mongols or join the Jin in fighting Genghis Khan. They 'solved' the dilemma by simply opting out of their treaty commitments.[168]

After hearing this, the emperor reluctantly consented to agree peace terms. These were steep: his daughter was to be given in marriage to Genghis and she would have five hundred youths and maidens for her retinue; as war reparations the Jin would pay 3,000 horses, 100,000 gold bars and 300,000 yards of silk; moreover, the emperor must release a number of named political prisoners, relatives of the important Khitan officials who had defected to the Mongols.[169] It was a one-sided peace, for the Mongol princes were even then taking more towns in Shanxi province. But Genghis did at least end the tight investment of Peking by his armies, though he kept all routes in and out of the city blocked. Probably both sides regarded the peace as no more than a truce. The future was uncertain, but the Jin empire had been conclusively humbled, and by the military genius of a man who twenty years earlier was an obscure nomad.[170]

8

The Conquest of Northern China

The truce did not last long, as many on both sides had suspected would be the case. Scarcely had he ratified the paperwork than emperor Hsuan Tsung, tired of the vulnerability of Peking, decided to transfer his headquarters to Kaifeng in the south (June 1214). The members of his council in favour of the move argued that it was easier to defend than Peking, as its perimeter was said to stretch for 120 miles, with strong rampart walls and a series of moats interspersed with gardens and orchards.[1] This was the final stage in the process of Jurchen sinicisation, and it meant abandoning Inner Mongolia and Manchuria. It was said that the imperial counsellor Tu Chan'i, the most important representative of the 'old' Jurchens (and the man who had urged the emperor to relocate north to Liaoyang) died of a broken heart when he heard the news. With Hsuan Tsung went the supreme commander Kao Chi, but the prince imperial stayed behind in an attempt to rebut the canard that his father was simply running away; his military advisers were also left behind.[2]

Hsuan Tsung's motives may be variously identified; they include a hatred of the north, with its numerous Khitans; his fear that his power base was as insecure as his predecessor, the former Prince of Wei's had been (after all he had come to power by a coup and could be displaced by a coup); and a cynical analysis that the territory north of the Yellow River was more trouble than it was worth, whereas the Huang He delta, rich in crops and revenues, was the truly valuable heart of empire. As a pathetic sop to the people he was abandoning the emperor announced an amnesty for all rebels.[3]

The two left behind did their best, made a heroic effort in the north and even recaptured Liaoyang only to lose it very shortly afterwards. In any case, the move south was attended by a number of bad omens.

An enormous convoy departed the Heavenly City in July on a two-month journey: 30,000 carts were filled with court documents and there were 3,000 camels in the cavalcade, all laden with treasure. About thirty miles south of Peking the emperor's paranoia finally got the better of him, and he peremptorily ordered the 2,000 Khitans in the imperial guard to return to Peking on foot, their horses confiscated by the Guard commander, as he could not rely on their loyalty. The Khitans promptly mutinied and, when the other Guard members were ordered to disarm them, trounced them in an impromptu battle. They then rode back to Peking, seized more horses outside the city gates and rode on north, meanwhile sending an offer of submission and service to Genghis Khan. Such was the result of the emperor's ham-fisted attempt to unhorse them.[4]

In Peking itself the emperor's flight was taken as desertion and simply increased the already river-like flow of defections to the Mongols. When Genghis heard of the move to Kaifeng, he was angry, claiming that Hsuan Tsung had deceived him and this was a breach of the truce conditions. He then resumed hostilities, to the joy of the hardliners in his council such as Subedei, who argued that without permanent warfare the Jin would gradually recover all the cities and territories they had lost. Officially Genghis used as his *casus belli* the continuing refusal of the Jin to allow his envoys to the Song free passage.[5] He sent Muqali to the north to keep the Khitan revolt there at white heat; Muqali performed brilliantly as usual and retook Liaoyang.[6]

The Jin position in Manchuria was very soon hopeless. A telling incident was the story of general Pu-hsien Wan-nu who was sent to the Jurchen homeland in 1214. When his expedition failed totally, Wan-nu decided he would not return to Peking – where there was a fondness for executing unsuccessful generals on the grounds that they 'must be' in league with Genghis Khan – but would set up his own kingdom. In spring 1215 he declared himself king of Ta-Chen and insisted that, since the emperor had fled south, he and only he was the legitimate heir of the crumbling Jin realm. He appointed as his vizier a semi-charlatan named Wang Kuei, a Taoist who doubled as fortune teller and interpreter of the *I Ching*.[7] The decay of the Jin empire was producing tragedy and farce simultaneously.

Genghis gave the command of the siege of Peking to Samuqa of the Saljiut tribe, yet another rising military star. Unusually combining flair with caution, Samuqa concluded that the assaults on Peking in the early months of 1214, when snow was thick on the ground, had smacked of overconfidence and underestimation of a very tough enemy. In those early assaults the Mongols had twice broken into Peking only to be beaten back. On the most disappointing occasion, the attackers had suffered heavy losses when they penetrated into the outer city but then found themselves cut off when the street they entered was set on fire behind them.[8]

Samuqa analysed the problems involved in a capture of Peking. Medieval Zhongdu (Chung-Tu) occupied the site of the southern section of modern Peking, but had a fortified perimeter of thirty miles, with twelve gates, forty-foot high walls of baked clay topped by crenelated brick battlements and 900 battle towers, three concentric moats and, most baffling of all, four smaller fortress cities outside the city walls but linked to the metropolis by a system of underground tunnels. Each of these was one mile square, had two gates, was fortified with towers and moats and contained a granary, arsenal and treasury of its own. One of the problems for a Mongol force penetrating the inner city, where they would then face another walled palace complex in its centre, was their vulnerability to attack from one or more of the forces in these four towns.[9]

The sheer size of China's population was another problem for, no matter how many the Mongols killed, there were always tens of thousands more to take their place, so that their task seemed like a Herculean endeavour against a myriad-headed beast. The population of the inner city had risen from 82,000 at the beginning of the Jin era in 1125 to an astonishing 400,000 by 1207, and that of Greater Peking and its environs from 340,000 to 1.6 million. There was a garrison of 20,000 battle-hardened veterans in the inner city and 4,000 in each of the fortress towns, but the rest of the male population was in arms, either willingly or under duress. Against this Samuqa had just 50,000 assailants (most of them Khitans).[10] The Mongols had still not reached the acme of siegecraft they would later acquire in their wars against the west, and to take the city by bombardment seemed a vain hope. Their main weapon was economic strangulation and slow starvation.

But all this assumed a Mongol army in a pitch-perfect state. The

reality of the years 1214–15, however, was that both sides were severely ravaged by disease and food shortages. The Mongols were hit by what the chroniclers call 'plague', probably a combination of cholera and dysentery (the so-called 'campaign fever') exacerbated by the summer heat. It was noteworthy that the Mongols contracted these deadly diseases only when they occupied or besieged urban centres; there is no record of significant disease before that time.[11] As if that were not pestilence enough, they were simultaneously hit by epizootic animal disease, which may have been equine influenza (horse 'flu) or, more likely, bluetongue disease, which is viral and insect-borne, particularly associated with sudden changes of temperature.[12] Additionally, both sides were afflicted with severe food shortages. The dire position of the defenders of Peking is obvious enough, but by this time the Mongols themselves were experiencing short commons; their destructive, scorched-earth policies were now backfiring on them. Genghis was reduced to demanding food supplies from the Jin, on the pretext that this was the only way he could rein in his hawkish generals. The result was cannibalism on both sides. Mongol anthropophagy seems to have been non-existent in normal circumstances but these were not normal circumstances. Many unimpeachable sources confirm the reality of cannibalism among the Mongols when desperate, though we can perhaps discount Friar Carpini's highly coloured story that Genghis ordered a literal decimation of his troops besieging Peking, so that the remaining 90 per cent could gorge on their comrades' flesh.[13]

Samuqa took his time, relying on attrition and stranglehold, never making the mistakes of his predecessor by attempting to storm the city, waiting for disease and starvation to do his work for him, confident to the point of certainty that the emperor would not send a relief column north from Kaifeng. In January 1215 Genghis returned from his long layover in Dolon Nor. The collapse of the Jin position in Manchuria and the continuing torrent of desertions and defections convinced him that the time might be right for another major assault. By capturing the important town of Tong-Chou he put a further dent in the defenders' confidence, fading daily under the impact of starvation.[14]

In March Genghis sent a delegation to Kaifeng to discuss the terms on which the emperor might surrender, but this embassy was upstaged by another, from Peking, which somehow slipped through the Mongol line and arrived in the southern capital to exhort the emperor to do something before it was too late. Finally aroused from his torpor, Hsuan Tsung decided on a final effort to save his northern capital. Two separate armies were assembled in Hebei province, one in the west, the other in the south-east, and the plan was that both would converge on Peking. The south-eastern army was intercepted by a numerically smaller Mongol force and routed.[15] The western force fared even worse. Its commander, Li Ying, a drunkard, was attacked and defeated while in his cups and lost a thousand cartloads of food which were being conveyed to the starving inhabitants of Peking.

Hearing of these disasters, the commanders in Peking grew desperate. The two most senior advocated entirely different actions, one opting for a do-or-die final breakout assault, the other wishing to steal away surreptitiously to the south. Wan-yen Fu-hing, the 'do or die' commander, was so affected by the violent quarrel with his colleague on this point that he slipped into melancholy and committed suicide by drowning.[16] His successor and the crown prince then appealed to the emperor imploringly to surrender, but in vain. Chin-Chung, the man who had opposed Wan-yen and advocated stealing away at night, redoubled his efforts to break out, and the crown prince begged him to take him with him. Having promised to do so, he then stole away with his own family, slipped through Mongol lines under cover of darkness and made his way to Kaifeng where, after a characteristic period of dithering, the emperor had him executed.[17]

While Samuqa invested Peking more and more tightly, Genghis, at last coming to close grips with the enemy, took six other cities in early May. The Jin in Peking fought desperately, knowing what fate awaited them if the Mongols broke in. With no food whatever reaching the inner city, and the defenders famished and turning to cannibalism, the nerve of even the most valiant defenders began to crack. One of the crown prince's most important generals, the Khitan Shimo Mingan, managed to get out of the city and formally submit to Genghis. His defection may have been decisive, for he then arranged a mass sortie of men under his command, including China's greatest masters of the most modern siege engine technology – whose expertise he placed at the service of the Mongol khan.[18]

The Jin fought tenaciously to the end, and the defence was marked by one of the first clear uses of firearms in history. Pioneers in this area, the Chinese had made primitive cannons and muzzle loaders. When the shot for these weapons ran out, they used silver and finally gold, melted down as ammunition.[19] But all was in vain. Abandoned now by their most senior commanders, the defenders gave up and opened the gates to Shih-mo Mingan, now Samuqa's deputy while Samuqa himself was fortuitously some miles to the north conferring with Genghis.[20]

The ensuing sack of Peking, which lasted a month, was one of the most terrible incidents in the Mongols' scarcely peaceful career. The victorious troops tore down temples, destroyed massive gates, laid waste palaces and parks and raped and murdered by the tens of thousands. One of the imperial palaces was set on fire, and the inferno burned for a month. The human slaughter was terrific. According to one story, 60,000 virgins killed themselves by jumping from the city walls rather than become sexual prey of the 'barbarians'.[21] Reports spoke of a white hill of human bones outside the city, full of bleached skulls. Envoys from Western Asia witnessed another such mountain of the dead, and once again all around the ground was greasy with human fat.[22] Obviously some of this was exaggeration. There are two views. One is that atrocity stories lose nothing in the telling. The other is that they are mostly objectively true, but that the human mind cannot truly encompass the horror of what has happened and 'downsizes' the scale of human losses so as to remain sane. An exact estimate of the death toll is impossible. One estimate is that the population of the inner city of Peking shrank to 91,000 in 1216 and that of greater Peking declined to 285,000, which would imply a mortality count of 300,000 in the former and over a million in the latter.[23]

However one appraises it, there is no doubt that the sack of Peking in 1215 was one of the most seismic and traumatic events in Chinese history.[24] Only one factor can be urged in defence of the Mongols' destructive vandalism, which was clearly a reaction to a year's pent-up stress and the deaths of comrades from famine, disease and battle. This is that there was no attempt at gratuitous destruction outside the city itself. The Lugou Bridge, a stone bridge south-west of Peking and later described by Marco Polo as 'so fine that it has few equals in the world', was left untouched.

Another obvious target for mindless vandals and destroyers would have been the Grand Canal.[25] This was begun in the fifth century BC and almost completed in the seventh century AD. At 1,104 miles long it ran from Peking through the provinces of Hebei, Shandong, Jiangsu and Zhejiang to the city of Hangzhou, the Song capital, said to be the largest city in the world, with a population of one million.[26] In the days of a united China (as in the Tang dynasty), the canal's main purpose was to link the Yellow River with the Yangtse. Thanks to the pound lock, invented in the tenth century by a Song engineer, it climbed to an elevation of 138 feet in the Shandong Mountains.[27] Beset by problems arising from the flooding of the Yellow River and by warfare (particularly the Jin–Song warfare of the twelfth century), the Grand Canal was unusable for long periods and gradually fell into disuse. The Liao notoriously put the canal out of action south of the Yellow River in 1128 to impede the Jurchen invaders by breaking the high dykes of the river. Ironically, it would fall to the Mongols to restore the canal to its former glory.[28]

All that autumn huge convoys of carts moiled their groaning way from Peking to Dolon Nor, bringing Genghis almost unbelievable riches, with carts almost collapsing under the weight of gold and silver. After spending the winter of 1215 at the Dolon Nor, supervising the Mongol occupation of Peking from afar, Genghis returned to Mongolia in the spring of 1216; he had been away from his homeland for five years. He rewarded most of his followers handsomely and there were significant winners among the Mongol inner circle (as well as a few losers). He appointed Muqali generalissimo in China and rewarded Shih-mo Mingan, who had supervised the final assault on Peking, by making him governor of the city.

He then sent an embassy to Hsuan Tsung in Kaifeng, suggesting that a permanent peace could be made if Hsuan accepted he was no longer emperor and instead took the title king of Henan. When the emperor angrily rejected this, Genghis decided to attack the Jin south of the Yellow River and appointed Samuqa to command a force of 20,000 for this task.[29] Confident of victory by 1214, Genghis had pulled Jebe and Subedei out of China. He rewarded Jebe with extensive demesnes, but there was no similar prize for Subedei; Genghis's ungrateful attitude, as indeed that of his successor Ogodei, remains puzzling.

Another major beneficiary was Chinqai, a veteran of Baljuna and later to be a key administrator in the Mongol empire. For his services against the Naiman Genghis had already given him an entire stable of the best horses. Chinqai had distinguished himself at the siege of Fu-chou in 1212, where he went on fighting despite an arrow wound in his left arm. On the capture of Peking in 1215 he climbed to the top of the Tower of the Great Compassionate One and shot arrows in the four main directions of the compass. Tickled by this exploit, Genghis gifted to him all the houses and properties within the range of the four arrows.[30] Another to receive a massive fief was a Muslim merchant named Ja'afur, who had been in close contact with Genghis ever since the Baljuna covenant. In 1213 Genghis had been held up on the march, unable to force the Chu-yung pass. Fortunately, Ja'afur had often traded in these parts and it was he who revealed to the Mongols the little-known path through forests and mountains which came down in the rear of the defenders; taken completely by surprise – they had not even posted sentries in their rear – the Jin were surrounded and slaughtered.[31]

The Khitan civil servant and top administrator Yelu Chucai was another who received promotion.[32] But probably the person to gain most kudos in the aftermath of the fall of Peking was Shigi Qutuqu. Genghis sent Shigi and two officers of the Guard, Onggur and Arqai, to make an inventory of the imperial treasure in the city. The Jin treasurer met Onggur and Arqai first, and proposed that they lop several millions off the count and share the skimmed-off money themselves. Onggur and Arqai readily agreed but when the same proposition was put to Shigi, he was appalled. He pointed out with some asperity that everything in Peking was now the khan's property and that the treasurer's proposal was treason. Shigi reported this to Genghis who, surprisingly, reprimanded them but did not execute them. But the khan was delighted with Shigi's behaviour and especially the words contained in his report: 'It is your property, so how could I steal it?'[33]

It is something of a miracle that the Jin did not collapse entirely in 1215-16. Their problems were legion. The province of Henan, south of the Yellow River, was so far the only one untouched by Mongol raids, but in the second half of 1215 it was hit by a disastrous famine, partly caused by the influx of a million new mouths – troops and their extended families – who followed the emperor south. Hsuan

Tsung tried to deal with this by the sale and redistribution of government land, but he placed the project in the hands of unscrupulous landlords who, systematically corrupt, simply added the public lands to their own portfolio or profiteered on their sale.[34] Particularly badly affected was the province of Shandong which erupted into peasant revolt in late 1215. This was another shock, as the Jin imagined most discontented peasants had gone south to Song domains in the 1120s.[35] Showing unwonted energy – or perhaps simply keen to appear in the field against an enemy they had some hopes of defeating after their constant humiliations at the hands of the Mongols – the Jin struck back vigorously. They sent an army to Shandong to put down the rebels and, in the guerrilla war that followed, 40,000 people died in the last six months of 1215 alone. The peasant leaders were taken to Kaifeng and executed, but the peasant movement proved protean and soon even more able leaders emerged. Seizing their opportunity, the Song entered the fray, forged an alliance with the Red Coats, as the peasants were known, and by 1217 had wrested the province from Jin control.[36]

The Jin were also attacked by Hsi-Hsia in 1214 and 1215, with the Tangut taking the western city of Lintao. The Jin were now in serious difficulties, cut off from all sources of fresh horses, in Manchuria, along the Ongud frontier and now in the west.[37] Once again making a supreme effort, Hsuan Tsung roused himself and sent a huge army, which inflicted a devastating defeat on the Tangut outside the walls of Lintao. Not easily daunted, the Tangut attacked again in the summer of 1216 but were once more thrown back. It was perhaps something of a relief to the Jin to reflect that though they could never defeat the Mongols, they could see off Tangut, Red Coats and the Song easily enough. As if to reinforce the point, one of their best generals, Shih T'ien-ni, gave up the hopeless struggle against the Mongols in Hebei and went over to Genghis Khan. A combined Mongol-Chinese force then took the city of Ta-Ming Fu and advanced on Tung P'ing, which proved a city too far. Stoutly defended on the eastern shore of a lake, the fortress resisted all attacks. The Mongols were baulked as, lacking naval know-how, they could not attack the place by lake or river but had to attack along a narrow front which the defenders could deal with.[38] Nevertheless, the Mongol campaign in Hebei in late 1215 essentially sealed off all Jin approaches to Shandong from the north, and

extended into Shanxi where many minor towns were also taken. For the Jin probably the worst aspect of 1215–16 was the feeling that a new crisis was arising almost daily. As one historian has put it: 'Between the Mongols on one hand and the Red Coats on the other, life north of the Yellow River was nothing short of a nightmare.'[39]

Faced now with four sets of enemies (Mongols, Song, Tangut, Red Coats), the Jin ordered universal conscription and (belatedly) a system of meritocracy for all promotions. They began by placing strong garrisons around Kaifeng to form a 'ring of steel', and constructed a system of blockhouses north of the Yellow River. A reward system was also proclaimed. Whoever retook Peking would become a field-marshal; whoever defeated the Mongol army in any engagement would become governor of a city; there were also financial rewards for the defeat of Mongol forces of 3,000, 2,000 or even 1,000.[40] All that made sense, but the other policy decisions of the Jin were unfathomable. The obvious course was to seek an alliance with the Song at any price to combat the Mongols, but Hsuan Tsung insisted on war with the Song even though he was hard pressed in the north. But if he thought he could win a propaganda triumph by boasting to his subjects about victories against the Song, to offset the almost predictably bad news from the Mongol front, he was soon disabused. While trying to cross the Yangtse in 1219, the Jin sustained a terrible rout.[41] The southern war with the Song was still dribbling on when Hsuan Tsung died in 1224.

Meanwhile, in March–July 1216 the Jin conducted a minor counter-offensive north of the Yellow River which managed to retake a few towns. But they were soon on the back foot again, for in 1216 Genghis launched his own fourfold offensive: in Shanxi, western Hebei, eastern Hebei and in southern Shaanxi. The last, and most ambitious, campaign was the one for which he had already earmarked Samuqa, and Genghis even went to the length of asking 'permission' from the Tangut to cross their territory in the Ordos. Not only did Hsi-Hsia grant this request, but they actually provided a large army to assist Samuqa.[42]

Before unleashing his hordes, however, Genghis made one final attempt at a negotiated peace. The terms were that all towns in Hebei, Shandong, Shanxi and Shaanxi were to submit immediately and the emperor must give up his title and accept that of king of Henan.

Once again Hsuan Tsung refused.[43] Wisely, Genghis kept out of Shandong for the time being, hoping that the Jin and the Red Coats would eat each other up, rather like the Kilkenny cats in the fable. It was fortunate that he did, for in 1217 another disastrous flood of the Yellow River prevented any serious campaigning by any army in that province. The loss of life in China in this era was terrific, but Shandong probably suffered more than any other region.[44]

Meanwhile the Mongols experienced a serious check to their ambitions in Manchuria. Their ally Yelu Liuke felt confident enough by 1214 to form a civil administration, and Genghis sent Anchar to him as a kind of ambassador and political commissar. After futilely trying to detach Yelu by bribery and diplomacy, the Jin reverted to main force, but the general they sent against him was quickly defeated with Mongol help. The Jin retreated to Liaoyang, licked their wounds, tried again and sustained yet another defeat; to add to their woes it was at this point that the defeated general Pu-hsien Wan-nu staged his own revolt, striking out on his own and declaring himself ruler of the new realm which he called Ta-Chen. Defeated a third time by a numerically inferior Mongol force, Wan-nu fled to Korea, whereupon Yelu made himself master of Liaoyang.[45]

At this juncture his lieutenants urged him to shake off Genghis's overlordship and declare himself emperor of Manchuria. Too shrewd for such a move – Yelu knew very well the consequences of treachery towards the Mongols – he moved in the opposite direction and in December 1215 set off on a visit to Genghis's base on the Kerulen.[46] Genghis was very well disposed to receive his visitor, as his agents had told him of Yelu's many laudatory references to him, but he was surprised and delighted by the lavish gifts Yelu brought – ninety cart-loads of gold, silver and bolts of silk. A beaming Genghis gave his guest the title of senior ally in China and asked him to carry out a census of Manchuria. This was a laborious chore, especially in wartime, but Yelu eventually did it and reported a population of three millions.

But before any of this could come to pass, there was a rebellion in Manchuria against Yelu, on the grounds that he was a Mongol stooge.[47] The fuse was lit by an apparently trivial incident. While at the Kerulen, Yelu complained that one of the senior Mongol agents in Manchuria, Keteke by name, had disobeyed his orders and taken Wan-nu's deserted wife as his concubine; as Yelu explained, this would simply ensure that Wan-nu returned from Korea to disturb the peace. Angrily Genghis ordered Keteke arrested, bound hand and foot and brought to his presence. Learning of this dread sentence, a terrified Keteke, went to Yeh-ssu-pu, head of Yelu's civil administration, and asked for help, knowing that Yeh-ssu-pu was secretly enraged that Yelu had not declared an independent Khitan kingdom.[48] Together the two men opted for rebellion and were joined by Yelu's chief of staff Tung Kuyu. The conspirators spread the rumour that Yelu had died in Mongolia, treacherously massacred three hundred Mongols and started rounding up 3,000 prominent pro-Mongol Khitans. Three of these escaped and fled to the Kerulen to tell Genghis what had happened. More bad news followed them. Yeh-ssu-pu marched south, seized Yelu's wife and declared *himself* emperor Liao Wang. The seizure of a wife had a particular resonance for Genghis. Seeing Yelu cast down and depressed, he said to him: 'Be not discouraged, for if grazing is good and our horses in condition, I will give you an army.'[49]

Genghis sent out two armies, indulging his favourite ploy of aiming at two targets simultaneously. One was to position itself between China and Manchuria, to prevent any collaboration between the Jin in China and the rebels, the other under Muqali to put down the insurrection. Muqali decided that his principal objective was Pei Ching (modern Chifeng), about 150 miles west of Liaoyang, by now a huge city and unrecognisable from the time in the eleventh century when a Chinese traveller had described it as a glorified caravanserai.[50] His capture of this prime target was the result of an amazing exploit by Muqali's chief henchman Shih-mo Yeh-hsien. It so happened that the Jin sent a new governor to Pei Ching, who travelled by sea, landed on the coast of the Bohai Sea and began travelling overland to his post. Learning of this, Yeh-hsien intercepted the new governor and abducted him. Taking his credentials, he assumed the role of governor himself and presented himself at the gates of Pei Ching as the genuine article. Once inside, he persuaded the guards to go on leave as the Mongols had withdrawn. Having established his authority, he ordered all troops manning the city walls stood down and sent a message to Muqali, who entered the city unopposed that very night.[51]

This was a massive boost for the Mongols. At a stroke they gained a huge arsenal of arms and armour, war materiel, 108,000 taxable families, thirty-two towns under the jurisdiction of the city and 10,000 troops, whom Muqali saved from execution on condition they would fight for the Mongols. This intelligent restraint soon paid dividends, as a Jin general named Chang Ching murdered the Jin commander on the coastal corridor and submitted to Muqali.[52] When told of this, Genghis appointed Chang Ching commander of the 10,000 troops Muqali had spared.

Muqali followed up this great triumph by sending his lieutenants out to mop up in a wide radius around Pei Ching. They took twenty strongholds, at least 8,000 prisoners and suppressed a cleverly planned guerrilla war by two ingenious Jin junior officers. Muqali then routed a Jin army on the middle Liao River. The triumph was partly offset by a near-disaster when his two lieutenants Uyer and Shih T'ien-hsiang came close to defeat in another battle. Uyer was nearly killed by the Jin general in single combat during the battle, but his colleague Shih T'ien-hsiang saved both him and the battle.[53]

The Mongols now had a secure hold on the Liao valley, and Genghis ordered Muqali to march south into north-eastern Hebei. At this point Chang Ching showed his treacherous hand (he was another with aspirations to rule his own realm), refused to march, was court-martialled and then sealed his doom by escaping while in custody; Muqali had him executed. His brother Chang Chi raised the standard of rebellion, killed a Mongol envoy who summoned him to present himself at Genghis's court, and soon headed a formidable army. Instead of marching south, Muqali now had to suppress a major rebellion in Manchuria, and the rebels held the densely populated area just inland from the extreme north-west corner of the Bohai Sea. While Muqali reconquered this territory, Genghis summoned Shih T'ien-hsiang to his court to reward him for his heroism. He gave him Chang Ching's former command of the 10,000 Pei Ching troops and the much coveted golden tiger seal.[54]

In early summer 1216 Chang Chi launched a major offensive. Muqali waited until July before responding, to rest his horses who were suffering from equine distemper. Chang Chi barricaded himself behind the walls of Jinzhou, near the coast, not wanting to confront the Mongols in open battle.[55] Muqali tried to winkle him into the open by sending a weak force under Uyer to attack a strategically valuable fort nearby. Chang Chi took the bait and sent out a large force, whereupon Muqali quickly got his main army between that force and Jinzhou to cut off the retreat. Uyer's contingent then turned to face the enemy, trapping them between his men and Muqali's. The terrible slaughter that ensued left 12,600 dead on the battlefield. Muqali then returned to the siege of the seriously weakened Jinzhou. A disastrous sortie ordered by Chang Chi simply left another 3,000 dead, many of them drowned in the Hsiao-ling River.[56] Grimly defending, Chang Chi got it into his head that his commanders were not pulling their weight and executed twenty of them for the 'crime' of having been defeated by the Mongols. Another of his generals, fearing that he was next, seized Chang Chi, handed him over to Muqali and surrendered the city in exchange for his own safety. Muqali at once executed Chang Chi.[57] But once again, contrary to Mongol custom, he refrained from slaughter. Instead, following the precedent he had set at Pei Ching, he incorporated 12,000 troops into his ranks, taking care to write to Genghis to get his endorsement.

It soon became apparent why Chang Chi had been able to make such a good showing. He commanded an elite division, fortuitously the main survivors, known as the Black Army on account of their black uniforms. Because the towns of I-chou and Kuang-ning remained defiant, Muqali singled them out for an awful warning. After taking them by siege, he massacred every living soul there, except of course for the inevitable 'reserved occupations': masons, carpenters, craftsmen, artisans.[58] Manchuria was now, at least temporarily, pacified. As the last piece of the puzzle, Wan-nu sent his submission from Korea, guaranteed by the dispatch of his son as hostage at Muqali's side, and was allowed back into the mountainous region of Manchuria on the border with Korea, where he ruled as a local warlord until 1233.[59] Together with Muqali, he was the only clear beneficiary of the turmoil in Manchuria in 1215–16.[60]

Muqali's exploits in Manchuria were heroic. Unquestionably, though, the major event of 1216 was Samuqa's campaign in the south. Samuqa was not in Genghis's inner circle and had earned his advancement on pure merit. He was on particularly bad terms with Shigi Qutuqu who, for obscure reasons not divulged in the sources, hated him and spread the rumour that as a young man Samuqa had copulated with a goat.[61] Starting in September from Tung Sheng (near modern Baotou), where the Yellow River veers sharply south to complete the horseshoe bend, he marched south, keeping parallel to the river but further to the west, passing through the Ordos and Shaanxi on his way to the River Wei, where he sacked the town of Hsi-an (modern Weinan) on the south bank in November.[62] In marching the 375–400 miles further south to where the Wei meets the Yellow River, Samuqa passed through a variety of climatic regions, almost from the grasslands of Mongolia to the subtropical regions of the Yangtse basin.[63] At Yen-an he joined forces with 30,000 Tangut horsemen but rode fast with them to the Wei, bypassing the three 'Chou' towns (Fang-chou, Yao-chou and T'ung-chou), crossing the Wei and penetrating into Song territory.[64]

Since the Jin were already at war with the Song, they had no compunction about following Samuqa there. Emperor Hsuan Tsung was convinced that Genghis had finally made a major blunder in allowing this Mongol army to operate so far from its confreres, and assembled five separate armies that he sent in hot pursuit. Dodging, weaving, doubling back on his tracks and marching in circles, Samuqa managed to avoid them all, arriving eventually at a point only seven miles away from Kaifeng in December, and even capturing the town of Ju-chou before his pursuers could catch up.[65] Kaifeng was too strong to attack, but the unexpected presence of the Mongols so close to the southern capital caused a sensation; Samuqa made a point of laying waste the environs so as further to dent Jin credibility.[66]

His orders from Genghis were to reconnoitre the country south of the Yellow River and to keep the pressure on the Jin, and this he had done successfully. But Samuqa was aware that speed, mobility and voluntarism would carry him only so far; the five avenging armies were close on his tail. Stretching them out so that they became separated, he retreated at speed along an easier route on the south bank of the Yellow River and the valley of the Luo – a direct northward crossing was not possible because of the arc of fortified towns protecting Kaifeng on the north bank. At Mien-chou in January 1217 he turned and routed one of the pursuing forces, which through forced marches had lost touch with the other four. The Jin continued to be astounded at Mongol mobility: 'They come as though the sky were falling, and they disappear like a flash of lightning.'[67]

Next Samuqa crossed the Yellow River on the ice, and struck north towards Ping-yang on the western bank of the Fen River (modern Linfen). The Jin, now combined into a single huge army, continued to dog him. The Tangut, their contractual obligations completed, left him at the Ho-Ching ford at the confluence of the Fen and Yellow Rivers. Meanwhile emperor Hsuan Tsung had come up with the idea of declaring a general pardon for all Chinese personnel serving with the Mongols, on the grounds that they must have been forced. This ploy was remarkably successful; no fewer than 13,000 men deserted Samuqa's host.[68] Since his original force of 60,000 had contained 30,000 Tangut and there had been battle losses, Samuqa was reduced to an army smaller than 15,000 effectives. Forced to fight ferociously to avoid being caught between the Jin garrison at Ping-yang and the huge army in his rear, Samuqa fought his way past Ping-yang with losses which even he admitted were unacceptable. Still in deadly danger, Samuqa was essentially saved by the brilliant efficiency of the Mongol courier service. Alerted to his plight, the high command diverted the Jin pursuers in Shanxi by smokescreen raids on phantom targets, confusing the Jin and allowing Samuqa to get home safely. He at last reached the city of Ta-t'ung (Datong) in February to find that the Mongols had finally taken it by attrition after so many frontal attacks had failed.[69]

Samuqa's campaign was one of the great Mongol exploits. With just 30,000 men before the Tangut joined him, he penetrated to the heart of the Jin state, all the time moving through terrain alive with fortified towns and strongholds, and where vastly superior enemy forces were deployed against him. From mid-November 1216 to the third week of January 1217, besides the days when he was giving battle or besieging towns, he marched 700 miles in fifty days. The Jin were shaken by his great raid, and feared that it was simply the harbinger of further Mongol incursions, probably next time with at least two such armies, with maybe one of them following the same itinerary and the other cutting through Hebei; they thought it was likely the commanders would be Samuqa and Jebe (they were unaware he was no longer in China).[70]

They sent an embassy to Genghis to enquire what his revised peace terms might be but Genghis replied, after taking advice from Samuqa, that all places in Hebei and Shandong had to surrender as well as those in Shanxi and Shaanxi previously mentioned; moreover, the requirement that Hsuan Tsung drop the title of emperor and style himself king of Henan still stood. Once again talks collapsed and the war went on. Genghis increasingly saw little point in peace talks, for he now thought he could achieve all his ambitions without compromising. As he put it: 'The present situation is like a hunt. We have taken all the deer, only a rabbit is left, so why not let it go!'[71] Amazingly, no more was ever heard of Samuqa; he disappears from Mongol chronicles after 1217 as if he had never existed.

The immediate result of Samuqa's campaign and the intelligence he brought back was that Genghis summoned his generalissimo Muqali to his encampment on the Tula River for a summit conference to discuss grand strategy in China. When he arrived there in February 1217, Muqali received the greatest reception ever given a Mongol general. Lavished with gifts and publicly praised by Genghis, he was also given the hereditary title of Prince of the Realm and made the khan's viceroy and lieutenant-general in China. It was proclaimed throughout the empire that Mongol troops must obey Muqali's every command as though it came from Genghis himself. To reinforce this, before his departure Genghis paid him the unique compliment of giving him a seal of authority shaped like a golden tiger and a nine-tailed banner.[72]

The discussions were so protracted that it was not until September 1217 that Muqali returned to China. The two men agreed that the Jin must be eliminated from every last area north of the Yellow River before the final attack on Henan province. Although Genghis praised the strides Muqali had made in siegecraft, he told him that even more improvements would be necessary before they could hope to take Kaifeng. He should also begin administering conquered territory as if it was already a long-standing part of the Mongol empire, using Khitan and Chinese bureaucrats.[73] The force Muqali was given to achieve these objectives was perilously short on numbers: 10,000 elite Mongol troops, 10,000 Ongud, 3,000 Ongirrad, 20,000 troops from Manchuria, a mixed force of Khitans and *juyin* some 15,000 strong and 10,000 former Jin troops from Hebei, making 70,000 in all, with mounts. The danger was that many of the non-Mongol elements were deserters and defectors who followed the fortunes of war and embraced the winning side. If Muqali started losing battles in China it might be a different story, for these were men who had ratted and they could do so again.[74]

Muqali's idea was to divide these troops into three detachments, one to ravage western and southern Hebei, another to recover eastern Hebei and invade Shandong, and the third to lay waste northern Shaanxi.[75] The last depended on Tangut assistance, but the new chief minister in Hsi-Hsia was anti-Mongol and persuaded the Tangut emperor to reverse the policy of aiding the Mongols – which had contributed so signally to Samuqa's success. In the light of this Genghis thought Muqali's tripartite strategy too ambitious and volunteered to handle the western campaign himself. In what was to be his final campaign in China, Genghis struck south once more in February 1218, crossed the northern Yellow River on the ice, besieged the Tangut capital of Chung-Hsing (Yinchuan) and forced the Tangut to think again. They quickly made peace on the old basis that they would supply troops as requested.[76]

In 1217–21 Muqali campaigned in Shanxi, Hebei and Shandong, initially dividing his forces into three and until January 1218 restricting himself to reducing minor towns, laying waste the countryside and generally waging a war of attrition, intending gradually to work round to the big cities that were very strongly defended.[77] Indeed one of the three forces, operating in Shanxi, mainly functioned as a diversion. But he was hampered by lack of numbers, and especially of the surplus needed to garrison towns, so that a Jin offensive in early 1218 retook most of the towns he had captured. The sheer number of Chinese constituted a headache in itself, and the task of winning hearts and minds was nearly impossible given the Mongols' reputation for being 'massacre-happy'; Muqali tried to lay this ghost by leniency and conciliation, but it was always an uphill struggle.[78] Moreover, Jin morale showed no real sign of cracking, despite the copious desertions, and every town he took cost him sorely in casualties. Muqali also could not be permanently on the warpath, since he had to fulfil Genghis's directive to find new methods of siegecraft, and this required study and research. Soon he was scaling down his Chinese ambitions. He decided to postpone the reconquest of Shandong and the occupation of eastern Hebei in favour of retaining his position in western Hebei and achieving the total conquest of Shanxi.

It may be queried why Muqali concentrated on the difficult and mountainous province of Shanxi, but in fact his thinking was sound. His reasons were threefold: whoever possessed it had a perfect defensive position; its occupation extinguished all hopes of reinforcement to the beleaguered Jin garrisons in the western provinces; and it was crucial to depress morale in Hebei for, until that province was pacified, no campaign in Shandong could ever be successful.

Muqali acknowledged that he had initially miscalculated, thinking the Jin would concentrate on their war with the Song and not counter-attack north of the Yellow River.[79] But then he had two strokes of luck. Genghis, by now concentrating on a different, far-distant war with shah Muhammad of Khwarezmia, made a superhuman effort to raise further manpower. By the end of 1218 Muqali had 100,000 troops, including 23,000 Mongols.[80] And in Hebei he was able to do more than the holding operation he had pessimistically envisaged, thanks to the appearance of a new military talent.

Chang Jou had begun his martial career as leader of a militia unit – almost a guerrilla band, but one officially recognised by the Jin; such units were the principal way the Jin kept resistance alive after their constant defeat in battle. Chang Jou surrendered to Muqali in 1217 and, if he had been dealing with a more traditional Mongol leader, would certainly have been executed, for he refused to kowtow or kneel to an image of Genghis when ordered to do so. The story ran that Muqali took his parents hostage and thus forced him to serve him loyally, but this appears to be apocryphal.[81] Chang Jou, though cruel and treacherous, remained steadfastly loyal and proved to have rare military flair. His duel with the Jin general Wu Hsien – reportedly the most able of the emperor's captains and one of the nine 'dukes' (field-marshals) appointed by him in the years 1218–20 – became legendary. Aside from defeating Wu Hsien in four pitched battles and taking thirty cities in Hebei, he came to Genghis's notice by his inspired defence of the city of Man-ch'eng when, caught off balance by a Jin attack with his main fighting force elsewhere, he improvised a successful check on the attackers, using old men, women and soldiers on sick call.[82]

With his flank more than secure as a result of Chang Jou's brilliance, Muqali crashed into Shanxi in 1218, taking town after town until by 1219 only the southernmost tip of the province was in enemy hands. His conquest was essentially a twofold affair: first the Fen River, the principal food-growing area, then the highlands between the Fen and the Yellow River. He then returned to Hebei to receive the formal surrender in the summer of 1220 of the remaining Jin towns in that province, including the key garrison at Ta-ming. By August 1220 he felt confident enough to switch to the second part of his grand strategy: the total conquest of Hebei and the recovery of Shandong.[83]

Amazingly, in the light of the grim, slugging struggle he had endured in Shanxi, by the end of 1220 he was the complete master of Hebei. The surrender of the key city of Chi-nan (modern Jinan) marked a turning point in the Mongol conquest of north China, as for the first time the invaders were receiving the voluntary submission of vast areas. In part it was likely that Muqali's policy of conciliation and moderation had paid off, but most probably the major reason for the new attitude was that the Chinese people were finally losing confidence in the Jin and concluding that the future lay with the Mongols.[84] So confident was Muqali that he set up a court and a central administration in Ta-t'ung (Datong). In far-off Khwarezmia, Genghis heard that the Khitans referred to Muqali as *guyin* (ruler). Far from being jealous or peevish, Genghis sent a personal message to his favourite general: 'that title is a good omen.'[85]

Very tall, with curly whiskers, fond of conviviality and extremely generous, Muqali had earned the right to be considered a true viceroy. He had just one principal wife and eight secondary ones, and only one son, his beloved Bol. At ease with Chinese culture, Muqali was also something of a cosmopolitan, as he liked to wear turbans and other Islamic clothes imported from western Asia.[86] By now he was also massively wealthy, not just from the loot uplifted on campaign but more securely from the extensive lands deeded to him by Genghis for his sterling services.[87] Muqali's regime in north China was a complex mixture of Chinese, Khitan, Jurchen, Uighur and Mongol culture and folkways. He absorbed aspects of traditional China at his court but retained the Mongol custom of the public equality of the sexes. For his administration he recruited mainly from Khitan and Chinese bureaucrats, and integrated the Chinese approach to the civil service with the best of the Mongol socio-political system.[88] In religious matters he was as tolerant as his master. Where the lay Chinese population was on the sharp end of Mongol demands for military service, labour (*corvée*) and goods, and heavily mulcted in taxes on grain, clothing, horses, weapons, specie (the Mongols had a tax for practically everything), Buddhists and Taoists were exempt from all fiscal burdens.[89] The freedom Genghis gave to Muqali to run China as he saw fit was astonishing, bespeaking a rare rapport between autocrat and associate. It is sometimes alleged that Genghis was alway paranoid, but the accusation seems hollow in the light of his relationship with Muqali.[90]

Meanwhile a final chapter was being written in Manchuria. The Jin made one last attempt to retrieve their situation in 1217, failed, and definitively abandoned the province. But Yelu Liuke's pro-Mongol grip on the country was always shaky, with a majority of Khitans yearning for independence, and in the very same year a powerful anti-Mongol alliance under Han-she plunged the country into civil war. Yelu managed to defeat him, but Han-she retreated into Korea with most of his army intact. Korea itself was already in turmoil, convulsed by the aftermath of an attempt at a *coup d'état* in which 800 Buddhist monks perished.[91] The Khitan invaders swept all before them and occupied the capital, Kaesong; the bewildered Koreans, at first not knowing what had hit them, initially appealed for help to the Song, who were uninterested.[92] Hard on the heels of the Khitans came Yelu and his Mongol allies with a powerful army. Yelu ran the rebel Khitans to earth, powering his way through terrible snowstorms to do so. He defeated the rebels, Han-she hanged himself, and his 10,000-strong force surrendered; the Mongols beheaded about a hundred of the officers.[93]

As a result of this incursion, Korea became part of the Mongol empire. The Korean king submitted but was ill requited: the first Mongol envoy sent to his court acted boorishly, making a point of wearing a bow and arrow to his first audience, seizing the monarch's hands and roughly thrusting Genghis's greetings into them. An annual tribute was fixed in 1221: Korea agreed to provide 10,000 pounds of cotton, 3,000 bolts of silk, 2,000 pieces of gauze and 100,000 enormous sheets of paper; in 1223 the tribute was consolidated into an annual quota of valuable sea-otter skins.[94] Yelu died in 1220, so the Mongols simply annexed both Manchuria and Korea.

There were several consequences of the Mongol absorption of Korea. They employed a policy of mass human transportation, moving any troublesome Koreans into north China.[95] They were bowled over by the beauty of Korean women, who became highly prized as wives and concubines. Genghis's favourite wife Qulan was considered so beautiful that it was commonly said that she was a Korean princess.[96] The Mongols also appropriated all the choicest agricultural land and

armarked it as part of Temuge's appanage. At a more general level the Mongols smashed the traditional balance of the three-way relationship between China, Korea and Manchuria, though this rhythm would reassert itself after the Mongol era.[97] Ironically, the Mongol invasion had the unintended effect of producing a true national consciousness in Korea. One result of all this was that, after Muqali's death in 1223, the Koreans rose in rebellion. Preoccupied elsewhere, the Mongols did not put down the insurrection until 1233. As a final irony the Koryo dynasty, founded in 918, managed to limp on until 1392, thus outliving the Liao, the Jin, the Song and even the Mongol Yuan dynasty in China.[98]

Muqali's ambition to achieve a definitive conquest of Shandong was complicated not just by the Red Coat rebels but by the entry of the Song into the war; the Song too wanted to annex Shandong. Song foreign policy in the twenty-three years that the Mongols fought the Jin has rightly been described as a disaster.[99] There was no attempt at an intelligent long-term geopolitical view, partly because of a mindset that said collaboration with a 'barbarian' ally always turned out disastrously. (The Song were thinking particularly of their alliance with the Jurchens to overthrow the Liao, which had ended with an even more formidable regime on their borders.) They were also blinded by their hatred for the Jin and the disastrous experience of the war of 1206-08, which led many of them to believe that, official rhetoric notwithstanding, they would never reconquer the north. The majority of Song decision-makers, though anti-Jin, thought it best to remain quietly behind 'fortress Yangtse'. They therefore greeted the Mongol invasion of north China in 1211 'with a mixture of caution and *Schadenfreude*'.[100] Only a handful of men in the upper echelons of Song government warned that the Mongols might be a more dangerous enemy in the future than the Jin had ever been.

Other factors too were at work in creating this Song apathy. Their achievements in science, technology, literature, poetry, philosophy, education and seamanship gave them the impression (probably rightly in the early thirteenth century) that they were the most advanced nation in the world, which bred a corresponding arrogance.[101] Nevertheless, there was an abiding feeling that the tribute they paid the Jin as a result of the war of 1206–08 was humiliating, as it undermined the Song claim to have the mandate of Heaven. Accordingly the 'hawks' gained the ascendancy and in 1214 announced the tribute would no longer be paid. Somewhat reluctantly, the Jin emperor declared war. Wiser heads at the Jin court argued that this was a bad mistake: north China was already groaning under a mountain of taxation, while the Mongols were winning the war and poised to take Peking. Morale would be seriously affected if, instead of concentrating on the Mongols, troops were pulled out of Shanxi and Hebei to deal with the Song. And surely it was stupid for the Jin to divide their forces, as any marginal gains they made from the Song could not compensate for the massive losses to the Mongols.[102]

The war began well for the Jin but all was undone by the disastrous defeat in 1219. The Song counter-attacked across the Yellow River and moved into Shandong, where they formed a partnership with the Red Coats, suggesting that they, not the Mongols, might become the masters of the province. (From 1218 to 1231 the governor originally appointed by the Jin emperor to rule Shandong in cohabitation with the Red Coats actually ruled as an independent warlord, changing sides whenever he thought he spotted a winner.)[103] But in 1220, while Muqali was campaigning in Shanxi, the Song lost a number of battles, and the Jin started to gain the upper hand.

Muqali had begun his campaign of 1220–21 cautiously, operating on the borders of Hebei and Shandong, capturing (as we have seen) the cities of Chi-nan and Ta-ming. An advance guard numbering 20,000 of the enormous 200,000-strong army the Jin were pouring into Shandong collided with him and was routed in short order. He followed this up with a major victory at Huang-ling kang, a ford on the south bank of the Yellow River, where he surrounded the Jin at the river bank, routed them and then pursued the fleeing survivors into the river, where thousands drowned. This defeat effectively doomed Jin attempts to recover Hebei and Shandong, though the full implications were not immediately apparent.[104] In both these victories, Muqali was immeasurably aided by the fact that, faced with a dire shortage of horses, the Jin was now almost entirely an infantry army, which could be devastated at long range by arrow showers.

Muqali next showed that he was the perfect versatile warrior by devising a stratagem to take a town (Chu Ch'iu) thought to be impregnable because of a wide moat which ran round the entire circuit of the walls. Muqali simply got his troops to collect huge quantities of

wood, moss and grass and built an improvised causeway for his troops to ride across.[105] He then struck due south and by October 1220 was at the Ching-chang River, where he swung east as far as Chi-nan before again plunging south towards the Yellow River. By late November he was at the outskirts of Kaifeng. Concluding, like Samuqa before him, that this was too strong to be taken, he turned north-east to Tung-Ping. Despite heroic efforts he was unable to storm this city, so ordered a blockade. By May 1221 Tung-Ping was reduced to starvation and cannibalism. The governor achieved a breakout with 7,000 troops, but the Mongols followed them and picked them off ruthlessly. By the time the Jin reached the 'safety' of the town of Pei-chou to the south, they were down to just 700 men. When Tung-Ping surrendered, Muqali himself turned north, leaving mopping up operations to his deputies.[106]

The main problem that concerned him was that the more Jin armies he defeated, the more guerrilla bands formed from the rump of the defeated troops – and this continued to be a problem everywhere, even in the officially totally pacified Shanxi.[107] On the other hand, the more victories he won, the more opportunists would desert to him. A good example was the renegade Jin general Yen Shih, who defected to the Song and Red Coats in 1218 then, in 1220, concluding that the only likely long-term winners were the Mongols, defected to them. Muqali valued his talents and, preparing now to move west against Shaanxi and Gansu provinces, he left Yen Shih to deal with Jin, Song and the Red Coats in the east.[108]

Muqali's strategy now hinged on sealing off the western territories of Shaanxi and Gansu entirely from the rest of the Jin realm, thus effectively cutting it in half, prior to a further bisection of what remained. (It was essentially the strategy used more than six hundred years later by the North in the American Civil War, with Grant's victory at Vicksburg in 1863 cutting off the West prior to Sherman's bisection of what remained by the march through Georgia in 1864.) First, though, he had to clear this with Genghis, who was then entertaining a peace delegation from the Jin.[109] Worried that Genghis might heed these siren voices, Muqali made effective use of the new postal service or yam, making sure his own envoy got to the khan first with Muqali's negative message.[110]

Genghis scarcely needed this kind of nudging, as the Jin envoy was not able to offer him anything worthwhile. The emissary stated that the emperor was now prepared to be known as Genghis's younger brother provided he was allowed to keep the title of emperor. Genghis was dismissive. 'I asked you to cede the land north of the Yellow River on a previous occasion and you turned it down,' he said. 'Now Muqali has conquered it. So what am I getting out of this new peace?'[111] At this the envoy started to grovel, and asked what were Genghis's terms. He answered that the emperor would have to cede Shaanxi and Gansu. When the envoy rejected this, Genghis dismissed him contemptuously, saying there was nothing further to talk about. Genghis then summoned Muqali's man and told him that the plan to conquer Shaanxi and Gansu was approved, capping this with another paean to 'the greatest of his generals'.[112] The messenger returned to Muqali and told him the good news.

Muqali had been urging this strategy ever since 1217 but hitherto Genghis had vetoed it, on the grounds that his own absence at war in Khwarezmia gave the Jin heart. Muqali thus needed to concentrate on the east of China – the only place where real pressure could be applied to the Jin in the short term. When informed that the khan had bent his right thumb in a gesture of approval, Muqali was overjoyed and said: 'For this reason it is not in vain that I serve to the very death and demonstrate the greatest energy and eagerness.'[113]

He began serious preparations for his great adventure and asked the Tangut for permission to cross their territory in the Ordos; by now Genghis had totally defeated shah Muhammad in central Asia, so they were in no position to refuse. A total eclipse of the sun on 23 May 1221, which his soothsayers read as a bad omen, did not worry him for, as he pointed out to them, he was on a divine mission ordered by Genghis who had spoken to Tengerri in person. His departure was further delayed when Yen Shih asked how he was supposed to make progress in Shandong while Muqali was away, given that most of it was now in the hands of the Song, officially the Mongols' allies, and the Song's allies the Red Coats.[114]

Muqali requested an embassy from the Song. A large Song delegation waited on him, and their reception gives us an interesting and rare glimpse of Muqali the human being as opposed to the warrior.[115] The Mongols had put on one of their ball games (primitive baseball?) which they expected the Song to attend. When they failed to turn up, Muqali sent for the senior envoy and asked for an explanation of this unfriendly act. The envoy explained that they had not been invited. Muqali liked the calm, serene way the man spoke, took an immediate shine to him and declared that from the moment of their arrival the emissaries were de facto members of his household and, as such, were automatically invited to everything. He laughed at the ambassador's discomfiture and said the penalty was six glasses of wine. Evidently the glasses were large and the wine strong, for the man reeled away drunk to his quarters at dusk.[116]

Over the next few days Muqali gained valuable insights into the Song mentality and psychology. He learned that there was a powerful 'peace party' in southern China, advocating a resumption of tribute so as to avoid what they considered a pointless war with the Jin.[117] The war party on the other hand tried to blunt this by insisting that the top Song general, Chao Fang, be sent to the front.[118] It soon became clear that the Song were lamentably ignorant about the Mongols, and woefully underrated their power and potential largely because of Genghis's departure for the war in Khwarezmia.[119] What about the Red Coats, Muqali asked. The Song, it transpired, were ambivalent about all rebel groups fighting the Jin as they were outside their control; they were prepared to use them but did not want to give them safe haven south of the Yangtse or support them financially, as their own military budget was already sky-high. The Song came across as indifferent to the feelings of their allies and obviously did not know how to manipulate sympathetic groups, as Muqali and the Mongols had done with Yelu in Manchuria.[120] Nevertheless, they had a high opinion of two Jin apostates: the major warlord Li Chuan, whom they both feared and suspected of disloyalty; and the former Jin general Yeh Shih, who had defected to them the year before and suggested that the Song pay a bounty for each Jin soldier killed – a suggestion the Song had taken up.[121]

The talks were inconclusive, and perhaps both sides already realised that sooner or later they would have to confront each other in Shandong. But Muqali enjoyed himself hugely, insisting that the Song envoys participate fully in Mongol drinking binges. The Mongols loved it when the Song could not hold their alcohol, got drunk, shouted with excitement, vomited or passed out. Muqali rationalised this humiliating treatment of his guests: 'If they get drunk, they are of one heart with us and no longer different.'[122] He was effusively friendly and, when the Song deputation departed, told the leader of their escort: 'In all good towns you should stay several days. If there is good wine, give it to them to drink, and if there is good food, give it to them to eat. Good flutes and good drums should be played and be beaten.'[123]

Muqali then headed south-west and crossed the Yellow River at the traditional place, Tung-Sheng, where the river turns abruptly south to complete the horseshoe. He probably had a total force of around 50,000, half of them Mongols and Onguds, half Chinese and Khitans.[124] At the Ordos he was met by the Tangut, who brought a huge force of 50,000; they had had second thoughts about their folly in exciting Genghis's wrath by refusing to serve in Turkestan, and thought this gesture would make amends for their earlier lapse. Muqali also received good news from Shanxi and eastern Hebei where both a top Jin general and a leading Song commander had come over to the Mongols.[125] He was now supremely confident, commanding a huge allied army and with his position in the east secure. He began following Samuqa's route of 1216–17. The city of Chia-chou, about halfway down the north–south stretch of the Yellow River, surrendered without a fight. Muqali found this to be ideal as a base, left a garrison of 5,000 men there, and ordered a floating bridge to link both sides of the river.

Then the run of success was interrupted by a contretemps with the Tangut. Evidently Muqali was developing delusions of grandeur as a result of his talks with the Song envoy, for he suddenly demanded that the Tangut commander, General Taga Ganbo, pay the same homage to him as was paid to the Song emperor. Not surprisingly, Taga Ganbo stormed off in dudgeon and took his army with him. Muqali, enraged in turn, pursued him and, after a forced march through the night, fell on the Tangut at first light and routed them. Many were killed in a panic-stricken flight, and the survivors were herded miserably back to the Mongol camp, where Taga Ganbo finally performed the kowtowing ritual demanded.[126]

Advancing towards Henan, Muqali learned that a Jin army had taken up a strong position on a hillside. His deputy Mongka Bukha asked to be allowed to lure the enemy out of their prepared locations by pretending to have only a small force. The ruse worked perfectly, the Jin were crushed, and left 7,000 dead on the battlefield. Muqali proceeded to the siege of Yen-an but this proved a tough nut.[127] In mid-December 1221 he therefore began the conquest of the Lo River valley – the Lo runs due south to meet the Huang He exactly where the latter swings east towards Kaifeng. The towns of Fu-chou and Fang-chou were quickly taken. At the former there was a curious and unusual incident. Muqali was questioning a warrior with a great local reputation as to why he had fought so fiercely for the Jin. The man replied that he had done so for twenty years, and his honour required him to continue doing so, even though it meant that now he must pay with his life. Muqali, moved by his courage, arose from his throne to make the sign of pardon but before he could do so his impetuous officers killed the man for 'talking back' to the generalissimo. Muqali was angry, not just for his officers' pre-empting of his judgement, but for their rare display of insubordination, something almost unknown among the Mongols.[128]

While he was holding a celebratory feast at Fang-chou, word came in that Shanxi and Shaanxi were in revolt. At the end of February 1222 Muqali crossed the Yellow River eastwards on ice and soon put down the rebellion. He then made his way back across the Huang He and marched down the Fen River, reducing strongholds as he went, and making for Ching-chou (modern Xianyang), the former capital of the Qin dynasty, a powerful city almost at the confluence of the Ching and Wei Rivers, to the west of the final eastern turn of the Yellow River. He detached Mongka Bukha and sent him back to Shaanxi to ensure it did not rise in revolt again.

At Ching-chou he found a huge Jin army waiting for him but even though they greatly outnumbered him, they hesitated to give battle, given pause both by the number of raw, untrained levies in their army and by Muqali's reputation as an invincible captain. Realising that with this great force in the vicinity he lacked the manpower to reduce Ching-chou, Muqali tried to seal off all the routes by which the city could be provisioned. With the rest of his troops he marched north-west up the valley of the Ching and began methodically capturing towns and fortresses along its length.[129] Weariness was on Muqali now and he wrote to Genghis to ask to be relieved, pointing out that he had already taken seventy-two fortresses in his career in China, and that it was time for someone else to assume the burden. But he was the victim of his own success: Genghis had no confidence that anyone else could consolidate the Mongol position in China as Muqali had.

He therefore rejected the request and told Muqali's envoy: 'Let him not return until he has taken more fortresses.'[130] It was bad luck for Muqali that yet another peace overture from the Jin had been rejected because the emperor would not agree to drop his imperial title.[131]

Heroically Muqali stuck to his task, and by January 1223 Ching-chou and all significant cities in the south-west had fallen. He then marched to join Mongka Bukha at Feng-hsiang on the upper River Wei, marking the most westerly point of this campaign. Mongka, whose performances the previous year in Shanxi and Shaanxi had been lacklustre through a poor grasp of siegecraft, was once more struggling to reduce a town. Muqali again asked for help from the Tangut and, very unexpectedly, got it: Hsi-Hsia had already taken a policy decision to pull out of the war, but the Tangut probably feared the consequences of a refusal to help the fearsome Muqali, who was now on their doorstep. A large Tangut force marched to his aid – large, certainly, but clearly nothing like the 100,000 that Chinese sources speak of.[132] Unfortunately the Tangut commander was slain almost immediately by a chance arrow fired from the city walls. His subordinates were so depressed by this and by the failure of the legendary Muqali to put a dent in the walls of the city that they pulled out. Muqali broke off the siege and once again wrote despondently to Genghis: 'After a month's siege I have failed to take Feng-hsiang. Does this mean I have come to my end?'[133]

Raising the siege, Muqali retired down the River Wei to Shaanxi, leaving Mongka Bukha to cover his retreat by a number of diversions. The Tangut meanwhile announced that they were making peace with the Jin; Muqali's failure to take Feng-hsiang convinced them that the Mongol wave had crested and broken – a judgement apparently reinforced when the Jin retook Ho-Chung at the junction of the Wei and Yellow Rivers.[134] The circumstances seemed particularly to reinforce the Tangut opinion. Shih T'ien-ying, who had the reputation of being Muqali's most talented officer, gave the key assignment of springing an ambush on the Jin coming to relieve the town to a drunkard; the man, in his cups, forgot to give the order to attack, and the Jin passed through the 'ambuscade' unscathed. The Jin were then able to surprise the Mongols and take the town. Mortified by this horrific loss of face, T'ien-ying refused to make his escape and went down fighting.[135]

Another defeat at Ho-Chung suggested that the Mongols were on the wane, even though a counter-attack from Anchar retrieved the situation. After repairing the bridges over the Yellow River broken down by Jin guerrillas, taking more forts betimes, Muqali crossed the river and marched north-east to Wen-hsi, intending to so position himself that he could deal with either a new Jin offensive across the Yellow River or a surprise thrust from the Song in Shandong. Suddenly, though, he fell ill and died. He was 53. His last words were that he had let his master down by failing to take Kaifeng.[136]

Muqali was unquestionably a captain of genius and he had performed wonders for Genghis in China while permanently short of manpower. It was Muqali who enabled Genghis to fight successfully on two fronts – something that would later elude Napoleon, the Kaiser and Hitler and is generally considered the most elementary mistake in the military textbook. He has the distinction of being the only Mongol general who was never defeated in battle.[137] But both he and Genghis singularly underestimated the sheer tenacity of the Jin – 'this truncated state in possession of astonishing resilience and determination'.[138] When the Jin concentrated on the Song instead of the Mongols this was thought consummate folly, but they not only held the Mongols in stalemate – Muqali was never able to land a knockout blow – but repelled the Song and eventually compelled them to sue for peace. The high talent of Muqali is clear from the way he fought successfully in terrain not suited to Mongol horses, in regions rife with disease and even in boats and on rivers – a form of warfare to which the Mongols were not at all accustomed.[139]

As to whether he was the *greatest* of Genghis Khan's generals, this is more doubtful. One may perhaps concede that Muqali certainly achieved the most *during Genghis's reign*, though many would still rate Jebe higher. Sceptics say that Muqali won all his victories against the demoralised and second-rate Jin, that he never defeated the best contemporary military opposition worldwide, as did Jebe, and even more so, Subedei.[140] Genghis always possessed what Napoleon considered the key to success – luck, and never more so than in his marshals. At least three of them – Muqali, Jebe and Subedei – were military geniuses who eclipsed anything that the lieutenants of Alexander the Great, Hannibal, Julius Caesar and Napoleon were able to achieve.

The death of Muqali gave new heart to the Jin and many others who had chafed under his dominance. The Tangut took no further part in the war, while in Korea a nationalist movement slew the Mongol commissar and his staff and declared independence.[141] More seriously, the Jin ended their war with the Song. Hsuan Tsung died on 24 January 1224 and was succeeded by Ai-Tsung, who saw the folly of simultaneous war with the Mongols and the Song; the latter, as well as being masters of Shandong, were by now beginning to make serious inroads into southern Hebei. They had already acted treacherously for, as soon as Muqali went west in 1222, they struck west and took Tung-Ping, adding all of western Shandong and part of eastern Hebei to their conquests.

Losing sight of reality, the Song now aspired to the conquest of Hebei, but overstretched themselves and were fought to a standstill by the Mongols under general Shih T'ien-ni.[142] There was stalemate until 1225. Genghis appointed Muqali's son Bol to succeed him, with Muqali's brother Dayisun as his deputy. Bol was an impressive figure, not only a talented soldier but a gifted linguist and a Sinophile who was markedly more humane than most other Mongols.[143] He had his work cut out, for in May 1223 the Jin invaded southern Shanxi and made significant gains. Bol struck back and in a campaign in Shanxi accumulated much booty and pushed the Jin back across the Yellow River. In September 1224, mightily encouraged by the Song–Mongol war in Hebei, the Jin crossed the Huang He again. Bol once more campaigned against them but lacked the numbers to repel them decisively; the Jin held on to their gains as far as the lower reaches of the River Fen until 1231.

Frustrated by the situation, Bol went to Mongolia to seek Genghis's advice.[144] He received scant comfort: Genghis told him he was preparing a great expedition to crush the Tangut once and for all, so could spare no more troops for China. Even worse, the irrepressible Wu Hsien, specialist in multiple defections, reappeared as a rebel against the Mongols on behalf of the Song and assassinated Shih T'ien-ni. The rebellion under Wu Hsien was serious, and for a while it seemed that the Mongols might lose the whole of western Hebei; it did not help that Bol tarried in Mongolia and paid a second visit to Genghis on the banks of the Tula in spring 1225.[145] Another multiple defector was Yen Shih, who had been appointed governor of Tung-Ping, the key city within striking distance of Kaifeng. Tung-Ping was besieged in May–June 1225 by the rising Song military star P'eng I-ping, formerly a commander with the Red Coats. Finding that he could not be relieved by Bukha, Yen Shih negotiated his desertion and ended up back with the Song and Red Coats he had betrayed seven years earlier.[146]

The conjuncture was a grave one for the Mongols, but once again the fabled luck of Genghis held. A new military hero arose in the shape of the assassinated T'ien-ni's 20-year-old brother. Six foot six inches tall, with prodigious physical strength, a voice like a great bell, also a superb archer and horseman, Shih T'ien-tse made his name by collecting a small force, surprising Wu Hsien and scattering his army.[147] When the Song made a formal alliance with Wu Hsien and assembled a large army for the conquest of Hebei, T'ien-tse at once engaged them. Though superior in numbers to the Mongols, the Song were deficient in cavalry. To offset this, the Song set fire to the hills behind him so that he could not be taken in the rear. They reckoned without Mongol ingenuity for, almost incredibly, a large party of Mongol archers managed to penetrate the smoke and emerge in the Song rear. Attacked from both sides, the Song were then utterly routed; their commander was taken and executed.[148]

The Mongols immediately went over to the offensive and recovered not just the whole of western Hebei but western Shandong too. T'ien-tse was the hero of the hour, but perhaps he grew overconfident for in November 1226 the Song took him by surprise and attacked his camp on a dark evening. T'ien-tse got away in the chaos, but fumed at this affront to his credibility. He gathered a small army, returned to the spot and surprised the Song in turn.[149]

With their position in Hebei and western Shandong thus consolidated and led by Bol from January 1227 (the sources do not explain why he had been so long absent from the front), the Mongols next attempted the conquest of eastern Shandong, the heart of the Red Coat country. There followed an arduous siege of the city of I-tu, but the Song proved doughty defenders and refused to surrender. Finally in April, racked by starvation, they attempted a breakout, to which Bol responded with a fifteen-mile feigned retreat. Finally, having lured most of the enemy troops out of I-tu, he turned and gave battle. He quickly routed the Song; many who fled from the battle drowned in a river during the pursuit. Marching back to the city, Bol resumed the siege; this time the defenders could no longer stand the dreadful trinity of Mongols, starvation and forced cannibalism and surrendered in

May.[150] The sequel showed Bol at his most statesmanlike. He refused to execute the Song commander Li Chuan, on the grounds that he was a popular local figure and his death would simply harden resistance in Shandong. He covered himself by writing to Genghis for advice on what to do, giving his reasons for sparing the commander. Genghis replied that he must do whatever he thought best, at which Bol appointed the saved man as his governor in the province.[151] He then took the city of Teng Chou in the heat of the summer.

By now the opportunists were having second thoughts about Shandong and starting to put their bets on the Mongols. One such turncoat, general Chang-ling, a former Jin commander, who had defected to the Song (and now to the Mongols), suggested an attack on Huai'an, one of the most important places in China, as it lay at the northern end of the Grand Canal.[152] This too was achieved.

With the conquest of Hebei and Shandong more or less secure, Bol went north to Mongolia in November 1227. He returned to China the following year but died in 1229 aged 32. After 1227 the Song gave up their attempts to establish themselves north of the Yellow River. Their struggle with the Mongols was a taster of the fate that would befall them a couple of generations on.

The subjugation of Hebei and Shandong was a twofold father-and-son affair, first the expulsion of the Jin by Muqali, then the defeat of the Song by Bol. It is clear that Bol had an easier time of it, that the Jin in Muqali's time were more formidable than the Song in Bol's period. But the intervention of the Song was fatal for the Jin, albeit indirectly. Genghis now saw the strategy he needed for victory. In his deathbed instructions to his sons, he advised them that the key to taking Kaifeng was to encroach on Song territory and attack the Jin capital from the south.[153]

The desultory operations in 1228–1230 were initiatives by local Mongol commanders and formed no part of Genghis's grand strategy. In late 1227 the Mongols took various towns in the Wei valley and to the south of the Liu P'an and Qin-ling Mountains. In summer 1228 another Mongol force campaigned in Shanxi and Shaanxi but to no great effect. The final conquest of north China had to await the khanate of Genghis's successor Ogodei.[154]

The Mongols had learned a lot in the long war against the Jin, notably about siegecraft and gunpowder; some scholars even credit

them with being the most important motor in the spread of firearms technology.[155] Their inchoate administrative policies were also important. Some authorities speak of the 'feudalisation' of north China – part of a process whereby the steppe aristocracy extended its privileges to their Chinese collaborators, so that the new lords received a portion of the taxes collected in their domains.[156] Genghis's military achievement in China was astonishing: it was not just the initial disparity of numbers and the idea of a mouse (on paper) swallowing a lion, but that he accomplished it while engaged elsewhere in what are generally considered his two greatest feats of arms; the defeat of the Khwarezmian empire and the conquest of Hsi-Hsia and the Tangut. The mystery deepens if we accept the view, popular in some quarters, that the Chinese crossbow at the time was a more accurate weapon than the Mongol longbow.[157]

The genius of Muqali provides part of the explanation. But Genghis was also lucky in that his enemies were hopelessly divided, with Red Coats, Song, Jin and Tangut all identifying one another as more important enemies than the invaders from the north. The rallying of Khitans (and later Chinese) in large numbers to the Mongol banner was also crucial. The Mongol–Khitan synergy was especially important, as both had machine-like organisation and high mobility.[158] Yet the genius of Genghis in spotting the potential for a conquest of China can never be denied. Although he was physically present for less than five of the twenty-three years of warfare with the Jin, it was his spirit that animated the whole enterprise.

9

Westward Diversions

The principal reason for Genghis's inability to complete the conquest of Jin China was that events to the west of his empire claimed his urgent attention. The expansion of the Mongol empire westwards was the result of both commercial pressures and geopolitics, but to show how it came about we have to 'flash back' to the twelfth century to examine the dual influence and impact of the realm of Khwarezmia and the kingdom of Qara Khitai (modern Xinjiang), their interpenetration and what Thomas Hardy would have called 'the convergence of the twain'.[1] Qara Khitai, the fourth of the twelfth-century states that make up what is now China, was founded by the Khitans after the overthrow of the Liao dynasty in China in 1125. Its rulers never entirely abandoned the dream of returning one day as the rulers of China. The Qara Khitans thus stood to the Jin empire in much the same relation as the Jacobites in Britain to the Hanoverians in the eighteenth century or, perhaps more relevantly, the displaced Kuomintang of Taiwan to the China of Mao Tse-tung. To put it another way, Qara Khitai was the continuation of the Liao dynasty by other means.[2]

The Liao dynasty was destroyed by a two-pronged attack from the Jurchens (who founded the Jin dynasty in 1125) and the Song. From the ruins of their empire one remarkable individual arose, a man of energy, resourcefulness and military talent that would have commended him to Genghis had they been contemporaries. Born in 1087, Yelu Dashi fled with the last Liao emperor Tianzuo north to Manchuria and then into Mongolia. Captured by the Jurchens, who seem not to have realised the importance of their catch, he managed to escape after five months and rejoined Tianzuo.[3] The emperor still hankered after a campaign of reconquest but Yelu, wisest of his advisers, warned that the Jurchens were far too strong and that the idea of a victorious return to China was a chimera. Unable to convince Tianzuo, Yelu parted company and started west with his companions. It was said that he joined the emperor with 7,000 men but when he left him he had just 5,000, along with 10,000 horses.[4] He was soon proved right in his prognostications when Tianzuo was taken prisoner, ending the dream of reconquest.

The subsequent history of Qara Khitai involved almost constant campaigning, including battles with the Qarakhanid people, the Seljuk Turks and, finally and most significantly, the kingdom of Khwarezmia and the shah of that kingdom, Muhammad II, who came to the throne in 1200. (See Appendix 2).

Into this turbid political bouillabaisse yet another element was dropped, this one the most important of all, for in 1208 the fleeing Quqluq, last hope of the Naiman, arrived in Qara Khitai after the Mongols' crushing defeat of the Naiman on the Irtysh. Appearing in the Qara Khitan capital with just a small band of loyalists, he was given a hero's welcome by the ruler, the gur-khan Zhilugu, partly because the Naiman and Qara Khitai had always been allies but, more importantly, because Zhilugu perceived Quqluq as a useful ally, beset as he was by the Mongols in the east and shah Muhammad in the West. He treated Quqluq as an honorary son, presented him with splendid robes and other raiment, conferred the title of khan on him, gave him one of his daughters in marriage and, more foolishly, allowed him to build up a private army with which, supposedly, Quqluq would one day strike back at the Mongols.[5] A magnet for fugitive and renegade Naiman, Merkit and all other enemies of Genghis Khan, Quqluq's 'praetorian guard' was soon 8,000 strong. It seems that Zhilugu was worried about the loyalty of his mainly Islamic subjects if it came to a showdown with Muhammad, and Quqluq was able to sell the idea of his second army as a non-Islamic 'ace in the hole' in case of hostilities. The foolish gur-khan saw clearly the threat from Khwarezmia and from the Mongols but ignored the dangerous cuckoo in his own nest.[6]

Once he was powerful enough to be a major player in his own right, the ingrate Quqluq, who owed everything to his father-in-law, began intriguing with shah Muhammad, proposing that they divide up Qara Khitai between them. Muhammad initially dithered, attracted by a counter-offer from Qara Khitai that involved intermarriage and a huge sum of money.[7] So confident was Zhilugu that his offer would be accepted that he departed on a hunt, during which Quqluq tried to ambush him.[8] Baulked in this attempt, the dauntless Quqluq found another partner in the form of Arslan of the Qarluqs. Together they launched a surprise attack on the Qara Khitan state treasury at Uzgand and emptied the vaults. Prompted by this, Muhammad finally agreed to support Quqluq openly.

The war that followed was part external, part a civil conflict in Qara Khitai itself. At first Quqluq did not fare well. Zhilugu made a forced march with his army, which was still formidable, with an especially proficient cavalry arm.[9] He caught up with his treacherous son-in-law and defeated him near the capital Balasaqun, regaining much of the money stolen from the treasury. At this Arslan took fright, abandoned Quqluq and fled to Genghis to plead for protection on condition of becoming a Mongol vassal. Although badly defeated, Quqluq and most of his troops escaped the battlefield. With Mohammed in the west and Quqluq in the east, Qara Khitai was being raided from two different directions. Even worse, it seemed that Zhilugu's worst fears about the loyalty of his subjects were about to be realised, for when he returned to Balasaqun after his victory, the Islamic inhabitants of the town closed the gates against him. There followed a sixteen-day siege, at the end of which Zhilugu used war elephants to smash his way into the town. He then slaughtered every last inhabitant, to the number of 47,000.[10]

But in western Qara Khitai Muhammad was gaining the upper hand. Joined by Othman, lord of Samarkand and his mightiest subject, he crossed the River Jaxartes (Syr Darya), marched north up the valley of the Arys and over the pass to the Taraz valley. He then advanced against a huge army commanded by Qara Khitai's best general Tayangu and, after a ferocious battle in September 1210 near the Jaxartes, was lucky enough to gain the advantage.[11] The honours on the battlefield were even, with the left wing of both armies overcoming the opposing right, so that the outcome was indecisive. Then, in one of those flukes on which history pivots, Tayangu took the wrong turning, blundered into the enemy's ranks, was captured and immediately executed.[12] Nevertheless, at this stage the best military analysts thought that Zhilugu would win the war in the end, as he certainly would have done had Quqluq not complicated the picture.[13]

In the years after 1211, however, the kingdom of Qara Khitai came to a sudden end. Continual warfare had drained the treasury, there was a dramatic and precipitous financial crisis, and Zhilugu was informed by his advisers that there was no money with which to pay the troops. Zhilugu hit on the 'solution' of confiscating the wealth his soldiers had seized back from Quqluq after the treasury raid – which of course was the money Quqluq had originally stolen but which Zhilugu had had to promise to his men as a reward for retrieving it; such was the Alice-through-the-Looking-Glass situation in Qara-Khitai. The inevitable consequence was an army mutiny. Quqluq put himself at the head of the mutineers, seized Zhilugu and held him under comfortable house arrest. For two years Zhilugu was the nominal head of state but Quqluq was the real power in the land. When Zhilugu died in 1213, Quqluq abandoned all pretence and had himself declared gur-khan.[14] His intentions for his new realm have divided scholars: some think he merely wanted to usurp the throne while others postulate a grandiose plan to extirpate the old traditions and build a new society.[15] He accepted a situation where the old boundaries of Qara Khitai were broken up, with Muhammad controlling the former western sector and himself lord of the eastern. This unsatisfactory compromise was unlikely to endure long, given the shah's vaulting imperial ambitions, but for a while Quqluq enjoyed a respite while Muhammad was occupied elsewhere.[16]

A profound problem for the shah, which would continue to dog him to the end of his life, was that he could not control his troops, who were almost the stereotypical licentious soldiery, alienating the shah's new subjects by rape and pillage. In 1212 Othman, lord of Samarkand, decided that the shah's tax-collectors were even more rapacious than the old Qara Khitan administration had been, and rose in revolt; or rather he tried to take control of a popular uprising that had already broken out. All the men of Khwarezmia in Samarkand were hunted down, butchered and their disjointed limbs hung as trophies in bazaars.[17] This massacre of Muhammad's men inside the city led to bloody reprisal. The shah besieged the city, took it, massacred 10,000 leading citizens *in terrorem* and beheaded Othman.[18] The great city of Samarkand, rich from commerce, industry and the great silver mines of the upper Zarafshan River, had now endured three sieges in as many years, and its travails were far from over.

Muhammad, though, was elated. This was the second time he had emerged as the victor after a three-cornered struggle. The first was in the early years of the century, when he, Zhilugu and the Ghurids fought for supremacy (see Appendix 2), and the second the contending troika of himself, Zhilugu and Quqluq. It is not surprising that he began to consider himself one of Allah's chosen ones. He moved his capital from Gurganj (Urgench) to Samarkand, took the title of sultan and styled himself 'the second Alexander the Great'.[19] Nonetheless it was objectively true that he was by now probably the greatest power in the Islamic world. Having conquered the western regions of the old Qara Khitai, sacked cities along the Syr Darya and in Ferghana, he controlled an area that extended from the Syr Darya to Iraq.[20] He was effectively lord of the Caspian, that great inland sea that had fascinated the ancients from Herodotus to Pliny the Elder.[21]

During his three-year reign from 1213 to 1216 Quqluq looked apprehensively westward at Muhammad's rising power but there were no overt hostilities: fortunately for him, as he had his hands full with internal revolts. In 1213 the people of Kashgar rose in revolt because of Quqluq's religious policies; this was a serious insurrection which failed the following year only because the people were reduced to starvation. The famine was no act of God but a deliberate policy of savagery by Quqluq, who not only burned the harvest but then billeted his troops on families who were already starving.[22]

The old saw states that those whom the gods wish to destroy they first make mad, and Quqluq fulfilled the precept to the last letter. For reasons that are obscure, he became a religious fanatic and an anti-Islamic zealot. Apostatising from Nestorian Christianity, he embraced an idiosyncratic faith that seems to have been part Buddhism, part shamanism.[23] He abandoned one wife for another more in sympathy with his new vision of salvation and announced that henceforth all his subjects would have to embrace either Buddhism or Nestorian Christianity. The Muslims, always the majority, were scandalised but when the imam of Khotan publicly denounced the policy, Quqluq had him crucified at the door of his own school.[24] The obvious consequence was that all Muslims now yearned for the day when a liberator would deliver them from Quqluq's tyranny.

It is worth emphasising Quqluq's arrant stupidity. Anyone wishing to build a new society on the foundations of the old Qara Khitai had to find some way of binding up the wounds of religious factionalism and to dampen down the latent tension between Islam and Buddhism. Instead, the new gur-khan did the exact opposite.[25] He was absurdly confident of his position – absurdly, as he had a powerful nation on either frontier and had alienated the majority of his subjects through his despotism. Even worse, he had cut away at his own financial base as the powerful Muslim merchants wanted no further dealings with such an enemy of the faith.[26] Because Genghis had been absent in China for five years, Quqluq took his eye off the ball in the east and seems to have forgotten that he was still a marked man in Mongol eyes. In the west he continued to underestimate Muhammad, partly because of the shah's unaccountable diffidence about mounting a full-scale campaign against Qara Khitai, preferring periodic raids.[27] Quqluq, annoyed both by the devastation these caused and his inability to tempt Muhammad to a decisive battle, finally snapped and sent the shah a challenge to single combat. Muhammad, never personally courageous, became so petrified by the mere idea of a duel that he pulled out of the Khitan border towns he had occupied.[28] But his imperial arrogance did not diminish. In 1217 he made a triumphal progress through Persia, receiving the submission of any provinces that had hitherto held out. He quarrelled with the caliph once more and was on the point of marching on Baghdad when news came in that the balance of power on his eastern border had changed irrevocably. The Mongols had arrived in Qara Khitai.[29]

Genghis had never been particularly interested in Qara Khitai. It was true that Zhilugu had done himself no favours by welcoming Quqluq, but Genghis was wise enough to see that this was part of a continuing pattern whereby Qara Khitai tended to favour the losers on the steppes; in his dark days Toghril had been a frequent suppliant there but the gur-khan told him, reasonably enough, that Mongolia was too far away and the logistical problems too great for his army to be able to operate credibly there.

There were two main reasons why Genghis put the Qara Khitans in an entirely different class from the Tangut. Genghis's abiding ambition was to conquer the Jin empire of China. Hsi-Hsia was important strategically in the pursuit of such a goal; Qara Khitai was not. Again, Tangut meddling in the steppe wars had angered Genghis, but Qara Khitai played no part whatever in these conflicts, and was totally absent in the crucial years 1196–1205.[30] Therefore, Genghis had no particular animus towards its people and, in the second decade of the thirteenth century, no great interest in western Central Asia either. It was Quqluq's usurpation of power that changed everything. Angry that the Naiman prince was still at large and now, as ruler of Qara Khitai, seemingly thumbing his nose at him, Genghis needed little encouragement to send his well-oiled military machine west.

The occasion arose when Buzar, ruler of Almaliq on the River Ili (near modern Kuldja in Xinjiang), declared himself a vassal of Genghis's and asked for military help. Buzar was a former horse-thief who used the breakup of Qara Khitai to carve himself a fiefdom in a remote region. Never fastidious about the background of his allies, Genghis promised him one of Jochi's daughters as a bride. But before the Mongols could reach him, Quqluq launched a surprise attack on Buzar while he was out hunting, captured him and executed him. His son and widow appealed to Genghis to honour the ancient code of revenge, which he was happy to do.[31] He sent out Jebe at the head of 20,000 men with orders to occupy Qara Khitai and seek out Quqluq and kill him. Arslan was also sent ahead with a flying column, to reinforce Almaliq and stiffen its resistance until Jebe got there.[32]

As Jebe rode west, more and more cities opened their gates to him, the Muslim populations welcoming him as a deliverer from Quqluq's religious tyranny. Jebe scooped up the Uighurs, reached Almaliq, repelled the enemy and incorporated Arslan's Qarluqs into his host. At Balasagun Quqluq made a stand with an army of 30,000 but Jebe rolled it up contemptuously as if it had been a paper force and entered the Qara Khitan capital in triumph.

The whole of eastern Turkestan was now part of the Mongol empire.[33] More and more Muslim emirs went over to Jebe, convinced they had nothing more to fear from Quqluq. Qara Khitai was no more: the only (academic) question left was whether it ceased to exist in 1216 when Jebe entered the gates, or had already ceased to be after Quqluq's coup in 1213.[34] The leading Qara Khitan soldiers and bureaucrats were incorporated by the Mongols and went to work in the Mongol empire; they could be found later in positions from Russia to China as well as in important roles outside the empire, in India and the Baghdad caliphate. A handful of 'refuseniks' fled to the shah and a tiny remnant to the Cumans.[35]

After setting up a new government in Qara Khitai, Jebe turned south and pursued Quqluq into Kashgaria, proclaiming as he went that all who accepted Mongol suzerainty would have total freedom of worship. It had always been consummate folly for Quqluq to seek sanctuary in the region where he was most hated for his earlier scorched-earth campaigns, but at this concession from the Mongols Kashgaria simply erupted. All Muslim towns with Quqluq's troops billeted on them rose up and slaughtered them, and he was soon reduced to his personal bodyguard.[36]

Meanwhile Genghis proclaimed that 1217–18 would be the time when he finally swept aside all enemies. While Jebe and his host dealt with Quqluq, Jochi and Subedei were sent against the Merkit, who had found new allies north of the Aral Sea in the shape of the Cumans, a powerful confederacy of tribes destined to play a major part in Mongol history. The power of Genghis's streamlined militarised bureaucracy and his peerless army can be appreciated from one single fact: in 1217–18 he was able to commit major forces on three different fronts,[37] with Muqali in China, Jebe in pursuit of Quqluq, and Jochi and Subedei hounding the last of the Merkit north of the Syr Darya, where they inflicted a shattering defeat on them and their Cuman allies.[38]

Masterly though Jochi and Subedei's strategy and tactics were, they were matched by Jebe in Kashgaria. Pursuing his quarry relentlessly 'like a mad dog', he made sure that Quqluq was hemmed in on all sides, menaced by the shah in the west, Subedei and Jochi in the north, the Mongols in the east and continually harassed by a hostile population in all parts of the former Qara Khitai, who welcomed Jebe and his army as 'one of the mercies of the Lord'.[39] Jebe issued strict orders that there was to be no looting, since the locals hailed them as saviours but this favourable opinion could be altered by a single act of rapine. For 350 miles Jebe dogged the Naiman prince, through the Muztagh Ata mountain range and the Pamirs to the plateau of Badakhshan at 9,000 feet, climbing at one point to 12,600 feet to get through a pass, through a desolate, arid landscape of stark peaks, plunging ravines and massive glaciers.[40] He also sent a small detachment to northern Ferghana to receive the formal submission of the governor there.

At the border of Badakhshan and the mountainous Wakhan region (between today's north-east Afghanistan and south-eastern Tajikistan), near the headwaters of the Oxus (Amu Darya), Quqluq blundered into a box canyon where he and his small detachment were captured by a party of local hunters. Realising the value of their catch, they handed him over to Jebe, who had Quqluq beheaded; the severed head was placed on a pole and paraded all the way back to Almaliq.[41]

Jebe had achieved a complete triumph and once again displayed his brilliance, but his very success made Genghis uneasy. Always jealous and with more than a touch of paranoia, Genghis feared that Jebe might decide to set himself up as the new lord of Qara Khitai. But Jebe was far too intelligent to fall foul of a vengeful khan, whose wrath was like a typhoon. He sent Genghis a gift of one thousand chestnut horses with white muzzles, a reminder of a (single) identical horse he had received as a gift from the great khan many years before. A shrewd reader of human nature, Jebe had pressed exactly the right buttons; Genghis was delighted by the brilliant gesture and all his suspicions were allayed.[42]

Having finally quelled all insurrections among the Forest Peoples, destroyed the Merkit, mauled the Cumans, conquered Qara Khitai and executed Quqluq, Genghis naturally expected that he could return to the conquest of the Jin. But as it turned out he was overtaken by the sheer contingency of 'events' and forced instead to confront shah Muhammad. It has to be stressed that Genghis had at this stage no interest in conquest farther west than Qara Khitai and did his best to avoid conflict with the new empire of Khwarezmia. Geopolitical and economic considerations would certainly have made a clash inevitable by, say, the late 1220s, but that is very different from postulating bellicose intentions by the Mongols in 1218. It was essentially the stupidity and recklessness of Muhammad's policy of aggressive expansionism that must take most of the blame for bringing on the struggle with Genghis. It has been well said that Qara Khitai provided a wall or barrier between the Mongols and the world of Islam but that the shah mindlessly tore it down, with incalculably baneful consequences for his co-religionists.[43]

Genghis's remarkable restraint in the face of these different provocations arrogantly offered by Muhammad in the year 1218 was notable. First the shah offered battle to Jochi and Subedei. On many different occasions the shah had identical thoughts to Genghis but he arrived at his conclusions so slowly that when he finally acted he found himself pre-empted by the Mongols. Thus early in 1218 he became angry at the presence of the combined Merkit–Cuman host on the soil of his empire and set out with an army to chastise the interlopers, only to discover Jochi and Subedei had got there first. The sources are not totally reliable on the fine details of this campaign, but one account speaks of the shah reaching the River Irghiz, finding the ice on the river too weak to bear his cavalry and having to wait for it to melt.[44] We may take leave to doubt that he finally crossed it on the very day the Mongol army under Jochi and Subedei annihilated the Merkit, but at any rate at dawn the next day the two armies virtually collided with each other. Jochi requested peaceful passage, stressing in a message to the shah that his father had forbidden him to engage in battle with anyone but the Merkit or Cumans. Muhammad arrogantly sent back word that the Mongols were trespassers and must prepare to take the consequences.[45]

Reluctantly Jochi drew up his army, knowing he was heavily outnumbered, perhaps three to one (his own army of 20,000 facing possibly 60,000). His troops performed brilliantly and the cavalry charge from the Mongol right swept away the enemy left. However, the shah's right wing, led by his most talented general, his son Jalal al-Din, did likewise to the Mongol left. Both rights then wheeled around and in an all-day slugging encounter fought each other to a standstill until nightfall.[46] The shah confidently expected battle to be resumed next day, when he assumed his numbers would finally tell, but the Mongols performed their favourite trick of slipping away under cover of darkness, leaving campfires burning to make it appear they were still there.[47] Muhammad could claim a technical victory, but the truth was that he had been badly shaken by the ferocity and fighting spirit of the Mongols. Some historians go so far as to say that, with his tendency towards neurasthenia, from that day on Muhammad had a 'complex' about facing the Mongols on the battlefield – something that was to have dire consequences later.[48]

When the encounter was reported to Genghis, he was inclined to wave it aside as inconsequential, the result perhaps of a ruler's hypertrophied territorial sensitivity. Khwarezmian propaganda to the effect that the shah was not personally present at the battle and had not authorised it made it easier for Genghis not to construe it as a personal insult, though he knew the truth full well. He decided on an exchange of embassies to agree a trade treaty and any boundary disputes. The shah sent a mission headed by Baha al-Din Razi, which Genghis received with full honours and even allowed to travel to China to see the extent of his conquests there. He told Baha that he wanted a comprehensive pact covering all possible contentious areas and that he should take a message to Muhammad that whereas he, Genghis, was the ruler of the East, the shah was the ruler of the West.[49] Whether by accident or design, Baha reported this to Muhammad in the following words: 'I am the sovereign of the sunrise and you are the sovereign of the sunset'[50] – with a subtext suggesting a waxing and waning power respectively.

Privately, Genghis was contemptuous of the gifts of silk and cotton Baha had brought from Muhammad, and said to his confidants: 'Does this man imagine we have never seen stuff like this?'[51] Nevertheless early in 1218 he sent an embassy to Bukhara under two of his top Islamic bureaucrats, Mahmud Yalavach and Yusuf Kanka, bearing lavish gifts including a huge nugget of gold found in China.[52] Genghis's oral message of peace and amity wound up by calling the shah 'my son', which sent Muhammad into a furious rage, as it was the way overlords usually addressed their vassals. He then accused Yalavach of being nothing more than a spy and threatened to execute him on the spot unless he turned informer and gave him every last secret detail about the Mongol empire. Yalavach proved a cool customer and talked his way out of a tight spot, shrewdly mixing circumstantial detail and general bromides in an olio that calmed and placated Muhammad.[53] He stressed that Genghis had no warlike intentions and wished only to return to complete his conquest of the Jin empire, that in any case the army of Khwarezmia was far stronger and more numerous than the Mongols' tumens and that in no way could the realm of the khan compare with the mighty empire Muhammad had created as the new superman of Islam. Flattered, cajoled and relieved, the shah relaxed and allowed Yalavach and Yusuf Kanka to go on their way.[54]

But secretly he still revolved bitter, angry and resentful thoughts. He had been slow about moving against Qara Khitai in 1216 and the Mongols had got there first; he had dreamed of the conquest of China only to learn that the Mongols had just sacked Peking;[55] and he had been intending to destroy the caliphate in Baghdad until the news of the Merkit and Cuman incursion – for which the Mongols were entirely responsible – had diverted his attention. It is not certain if he knew that his mortal enemy the caliph al-Nasir had been in touch with Genghis, encouraged by the glowing reports of Mongol religious tolerance in defeated Qara Khitai. It is unlikely that the caliph actually asked Genghis to attack Muhammad – this would have been a disaster for Islam, even if personally pleasing – but in any case Genghis never allowed himself to be influenced by the views of other potentates.[56] Such was Muhammad's ineptitude that in 1217 he finally did essay a march on Baghdad, which ended in disaster. The determined opposition of the Kurds on his itinerary and the fact of his army's getting trapped in a ferocious snowstorm in the Zagros Mountains put paid to that ill-advised endeavour.[57]

No sooner was Yalavach out of the shah's territory than a huge Mongol trade caravan arrived at the northern Khwarezmian city of Otrar. It comprised 450 Muslim merchants, five hundred camels and one hundred Mongol cavalrymen as escorts, along with a personal envoy from the Mongol khan. The arrival of this caravan at this juncture calls for further comment. It was sent under Genghis's personal aegis, and he had put up most of the operating capital for the venture.[58] By this time there was a firm commercial entente between Genghis and the influential and far-flung corpus of Islamic merchants. Long desirous of breaking into the lucrative Chinese market, they had been invited to do so by the victorious khan.[59] The relationship was mutually beneficial, as the Muslims were powerful middlemen, very important to the Mongols for two distinct reasons: by this time the Mongols bought their clothes internationally and needed agents for the transactions; and because they had devastated the agricultural lands of north China, they now needed to import grain. Common interests dictated a commercial alliance, and there was no real barrier, since the merchants of Islam were attracted by Genghis's well-known religious tolerance.[60] As icing on the cake, the Muslims were invaluable sources of intelligence.

The immediate aim of the trade mission to Otrar was to get Khwarezmia to lift a trade embargo resulting in a serious shortage of cloth in Mongolia. Once the shah seized Transoxiana from Qara Khitai he severed the trade routes between eastern Turkestan and Transoxiana; Genghis's personal envoy aimed to get this interdiction waived.[61] Some critics say that Genghis allowed himself to be inveigled into a trade war by unscrupulous and manipulative Islamic merchants, others that he was testing the waters of the shah's intent. Yet another view is that such a massive caravan, with bulging wealth, was meant to overawe the shah and impress him with the Mongols' enormous purchasing power.[62]

Whatever the truth of this, what happened at Otrar was an outrage that echoed round Asia. Inalchuq Qayir-Khan, governor of Otrar, flew into a rage and had all but one of his 550 guests massacred. He claimed his actions were necessary because the mission was one great espionage expedition.

This was absurd. All business and trade visits to foreign countries in all eras can be described as 'spying' if one takes the meaning of that word at its most elastic. It was natural that any caravan, anywhere, would routinely collect intelligence on the places it visited; not to do so would be unintelligent in the demotic sense.[63] He also claimed that a member of the caravan, an old acquaintance, had addressed him by his former name (Inalchuq) and not his new title as governor (the self-styled Qayir-Khan) – yet another absurdity. It is possible, as has been suggested, that he was angered by members of the visiting party boasting about their riches,[64] but the plain truth seems to be that he was actuated by greed pure and simple. It is inconceivable that he would have taken such an action, with tremendous international repercussions, if the shah had not already given the nod. Some say the governor sought Muhammad's permission first, others that the shah ordered him to do it.[65] So either Muhammad was unconscionably greedy himself and had hatched a plot to share the vast loot with the governor (perhaps aware of the extent of Genghis's investment) or he had already resolved on war with the Mongols and had decided to present them with an unavoidable *casus belli*.[66]

Only one man, a camel driver, escaped the slaughter. It so happened that he was taking a bath when the massacre began and managed to lie hidden by the fireplace of the hot bath as the governors' troops rushed by in their blood frenzy. He then hid for three days and nights on a mountain top before making his perilous way back to Genghis's court to report the atrocity.

Once again Genghis's restraint was extraordinary. The shah had offered him a gross personal insult, had offended against all the canons of the then rudimentary international law and was, even by medieval standards, guilty of a war crime. Besides all this, Genghis had taken a huge hit in the thirteenth-century equivalent of the pocketbook. Despite which, his response was to send yet another embassy to

Muhammad, this time a triumvirate consisting of a senior Muslim diplomat and two Mongol grandees. The envoys announced that Genghis was prepared to give the shah the benefit of the doubt and assume that the Otrar incident was a demented personal initiative by Inalchuq, provided Muhammad deliver up the governor to be tried by Mongol justice. An irate Muhammad declared this gross impertinence, slew the Muslim head of mission and sent the two Mongols back with their hair shaved and their beards singed off.[67]

Finally stirred to anger, Genghis remarked contemptuously of his enemy: 'He is no king, he is a bandit.'[68] He then went up into Mount Burqan Qaldun and prayed for three days to Tengerri to give him victory in the *guerre à outrance* he now intended to wage. Ironically, an embassy from Muhammad on its return journey – it may even have crossed with the two shaven Mongols on their disconsolate way home – brought sombre news to the shah about the enormous power and potential of the Mongol empire. When he heard their report, Muhammad was cast down and was heard to say that he wished he had never authorised the Otrar massacre.[69]

It was too late now. Genghis sent a final message to the shah: 'You kill my men and my merchants and you take from them my property. Prepare for war, for I am coming against you with a host you cannot withstand.'[70] A worried Muhammad called a grand council of war at which his advisers asserted confidently that they held all the cards. The Mongols would have to come to them over nigh-impossible terrain and, by the time they had crossed a series of mountain ranges and the River Jaxartes they would be easy meat.[71] The counsellors also pointed out that the Mongols liked to bring their foes to battle at the earliest possible moment, and that was how they had destroyed the armies of the Jin in the first year of the China campaign. The best thing, therefore, was to refuse to play by Genghis's rules, to shelter inside heavily fortified cities which the Mongols, with their primitive siegecraft, could not take and from which powerful garrisons could, at the right time, sortie and destroy the besiegers. What they advocated was essentially the strategy the Romans had used against Hannibal during the invasion of Italy in 219–202 BC and which the Russians would use against Napoleon in 1812.[72]

But they forgot two essential points. One was that the logical corollary of their argument that the Mongol armies would be exhausted when they reached Khwarezmia was surely that the shah had to engage them there and then, before they could rest and recover their strength. The second was that, although on paper Muhammad's armies outnumbered Genghis's by two to one, this advantage was simply thrown away if they merely retreated into fortified cities. In a word, they would never have local superiority of force. Their armies would be dispersed over huge distances, allowing a united Mongol army to pick them off piecemeal. This of course is the classical tenet of concentration of force.[73]

Genghis made his usual meticulous preparations for the following campaign. Maps were drawn, the accuracy of commissariat arrangements checked and rechecked, the geography of the vast area of Khwarezmia pored over. At the many war councils the Mongols rehearsed the several advantages they were likely to enjoy. The most important was the infancy and disorganisation of Muhammad's realm. The empire about which the shah boasted was less than two years old and riven by fissiparous tendencies of all kinds. The central weakness was the antagonism of the nomadic Turks Muhammad used as his military arm and the sedentary Iranians, between whom there was notoriously bad blood. The shah had never been able to control his troops, who rampaged at will through the empire, alienating the peasantry, who also suffered from the violence and lawlessness of tax-farmers. Even if he had been able to manage these foreign mercenaries, Muhammad would not do so, as he depended on them to keep himself in power.[74] Where Genghis's empire had been efficiently centralised and the old localist loyalties broken down by the new decimal system, there was no real patriotism or even *esprit de corps* in Khwarezmia. A victim of its own prosperity, the entire region always threatened to disintegrate into its constituent parts, with each area displaying a 'what's in it for me?' attitude towards the wider empire (in China prosperity had been limited to the elite, and a militarised peasantry offered stiffer resistance). Nor did the polyglot nature of the shah's realm help matters.[75]

The conflict between the shah's centralising policy and the traditional autonomy of the feudal lords produced a result where twenty-two of the mightiest regional oligarchs were even then languishing in Muhammad's jails; at the very first chance of liberation they and their levies would join the Mongols. Because of his disastrous relations with the caliphate Muhammad could not play the Muslim's usual trump card – declaration of holy war against the infidel. The shah's army itself was unreliable, too dependent on Cuman mercenaries who obeyed their own lords. No talented generals had emerged except for Jalal al-Din, who was eclipsed for other reasons.[76] The shah was personally unpopular in his land, being viewed as a capricious and arbitrary despot. There were serious divisions in his council, with some advocating abandoning Transoxiana and retreating to Khorasan or the Ghazni region of Afghanistan.

Above all there was the problem of the shah's family. His nepotism was notorious; particularly resented was the way he replaced tried and tested local rulers with useless cousins and nephews. Yet all this paled into insignificance beside the almost unbelievable problems posed by his own mother Terken Qatun, a cruel, violent, manipulative, wilful and opinionated woman, who dominated and browbeat the essentially weak Muhammad. Most government officials were from her tribe (the Qipchaq, close confederates of the Cumans), and a kind of dyarchy existed within the fragile empire, with the shah dominant in Samarkand and the matriarch ruling over Khorasan proper. The two competed with each other in issuing empire-wide decrees, often contradictory and sometimes expressly rescinding the ukases of the other. A bewildered and harassed officialdom usually solved the problem by obeying the decree bearing the latest date.[77] Terken Qatun forced Muhammad to pass over his talented eldest son Jalal al-Din in favour of Uzlaq-Shah the beloved youngest son of the family, born of a different woman, but one who was her protégé and servant. Her hatred for Jalal al-Din was notable, which was why he was given the unimportant post of governor of Afghanistan.[78]

Given the brilliance of his espionage and intelligence system, Genghis was able to make use of all these internal weaknesses even before the fighting started. The Mohammedan merchants and their own agents had penetrated the shah's inner councils, and 'moles' reported what went on there. Genghis even knew that the Iranian soothsayers had warned the shah that the omens for the coming war were not favourable.[79] Khwarezmia was a gift for masters of disinformation. It was the easiest thing in the world to issue bogus decrees, purporting to come from the shah or from Terken Qatun, snarling the military and bureaucracy up into a tangle of confusion. On this occasion Genghis surpassed himself by circulating rumours that

Terken Qatun intended to join the Mongols, that she would rather be their prisoner than submit to Muhammad and Jalal al-Din.[80]

Genghis and his generals also pored over maps, pondering the differential landscape of the shah's realm. Like the jungle, the difficult terrain of Khwarezmia was neutral, favouring neither the Mongols nor their enemy. The shah ruled over territory stretching from the Aral Sea to the Persian Gulf and from the Pamirs in the east to the Zagros Mountains in the west (including all of modern Afghanistan and part of modern Turkey), but his lands were wildly heterogeneous. There were many deserts and semi-deserts – of gravel and saline clay – as well as steppes. A possible approach was from the east across the vast Taklamakan Desert, 100,000 square miles of nothingness[81] punctuated here and there by the oases provided by the River Tarim and its tributaries, which flow eventually into the swamps of Lop Nor, a saline lake.[82] Even more formidable were the mountains surrounding the Taklamakan desert – the Altyn-Tagh ('Gold Mountain'), with its wooded slopes to the south, between the desert and the Tibetan plateau, the T'ien Shan to the north and the Pamirs to the west.

The runoff water from many of these mountains converges at Kashgar, a notable and fertile centre for agriculture and horticulture (maize, corn, orchards, vineyards). There were many oases along the Silk Route linking China, Persia and the Levant, and that would later be the main thoroughfare for armies, traders, pilgrims and western visitors like Carpini, Rubruck and Marco Polo. But that was a later development; in 1219 this seemed an unattractive line of approach for Genghis and his armies. Nevertheless all oases and cultivated areas would be targets for the Mongols, for Genghis realised one could bring an enemy to its knees by destroying its economic infrastructure. A more tempting target would be Transoxiana – the country between the Oxus and the Jaxartes – shaped something like the letter H lying on its side, with the populated area largely limited to the river banks and the broad crossbar of the H, that is to say the courses of the Oxus (Amu Darya), Jaxartes (Syr Darya) and Zarafshan. Today Transoxiana approximates to Uzbekistan, Tajikistan, southern Kyrgyzstan and south-west Kazakhstan. Later famous from Matthew Arnold's poem *Sohrab and Rustum*, in medieval times the region owed its fame to Alexander the Great's conquests there in the 320s BC.[83] Between this central densely populated area and the Aral Sea was the great desert or desert-steppe of the Kizil

Kum or Red Sands, 135,000 square miles in area. To the west of Transoxiana, with its western border on the Caspian Sea, was Khwarezm proper, and to the south of Transoxiana was Khorasan. East of the settled belt of agriculture rise huge mountains, the peaks getting higher the farther east one goes, with correspondingly difficult and precipitous passes. The only real means of communication between the upper Oxus and Jaxartes was the valley of the Vakhsh, itself almost impassable; at their lower end both rivers flowed into the Aral Sea.[84]

The geography of Khwarezmia alone was a tough nut for an invader to crack. But each separate area would throw up different problems relating to the horses, food supplies and logistics, and all would have to be carefully 'wargamed' beforehand. Genghis played his cards close to his chest as regards the itinerary he intended to take, as this was the most crucial piece of information an enemy spy could learn. As for the numbers in Muhammad's army, these were supposed to amount to 400,000 – probably a gross exaggeration, with 200,000 being a more credible estimate.[85] But Genghis knew from his spies that Muhammad did not intend to confront him in battle, so he realised that he would always have local superiority of numbers over the dispersed garrisons. As for Muhammad's supposed prowess as a captain, Genghis largely discounted this. It was true that he had done well in the war of 1203–06 against Muhammad of Ghor and the Ghurids, but on that occasion he had been united with the then powerful Qara Khitai.[86] Even if, by some mischance, the Mongols had to confront the full host of Khwarezmia in battle, Genghis and his generals were confident. The shah might have great numerical superiority but his troops lacked the Mongols' iron discipline, their unswerving obedience to the khan, and their capacity for hardship; they had not been inured to the privations on the march and the suffering before and during battle that made the Mongol army so formidable. Besides, defending, the shah's troops could hope for little gain but, attacking, the Mongols would be spurred on by the thought of vast wealth and loot.[87] To offset all this, Muhammad would need to be superior in courage and military talent, but it was already clear he was far inferior in both. It was evident that he intended to lurk far from the fighting front, either on the bad advice of his generals or because he had been 'spooked' by the predictions of his astrologers. All in all, the omens for Genghis as he prepared another great endeavour were bright.

10

Downfall of the Shah

It is sometimes said that Genghis's reponse to the Otrar atrocity was tardy and that two years went by before he made his move.[1] In fact his riposte was remarkably rapid. While making elaborate plans for a grand rendezvous of the majority of his forces on the upper Irtysh, he ordered Jochi and Jebe, already in Qara Khitai, to take their 30,000 troops and begin the march west immediately. The idea was that when these two reached the Ferghana valley, 'arrow messengers' or fast-travelling couriers from the main force converging on Otrar would be in touch with the khan's latest orders. The orders to set out at once committed Jebe and Jochi to a gruelling trek in winter over high mountain passes, but there was no gainsaying the khan's commands. The barrier of the Altyn-Tagh range forced travellers to take a route either north of the T'ien Shan or south of the River Tarim through the fearsome Taklamakan Desert. The rule of thumb was that trade caravans took the southerly route to avoid the worst mountain passes, but large groups of migrants, needing more water than the desert could provide, went north.[2] With 30,000 men Jebe and Jochi had no choice but to go north, yet they do not seem to have followed the conventional route through Dzungaria; instead they veered slightly south-west and found a pass between the Pamirs and the T'ien Shan, most likely through the Altai range (the sources are anything but pellucid). It was probably the Terek-Dawan defile, an all-year pass at 13,000 feet, which later became the principal route from Qara Khitai and was used by Marco Polo.[3] On the way to this pass the Mongols rode through snowstorms and snow 5–6 feet deep, their horses wrapped in yak-hides and the riders wearing double sheepskin coats. Shortage of food meant they often had to open the veins of their mounts, drink the blood then close the veins up again. Not surprisingly,

many horses dropped dead from the snow, ice and blood letting; any that did were devoured instantly.

Finally the Mongols reached the fertile valley of Ferghana in spring 1219 after an exploit that easily rivals Hannibal's crossing of the Alps.[4] Turkestan was then the name given to the entire area stretching from modern China to the Caspian, so it is a high commendation to say that the Ferghana valley was the commercial jewel of the entire region. It produced gold, silver, turquoise, quicksilver, iron, copper, naphtha, bitumen, millstones, perfume, cloth, weapons, needles, scissors, pots, bows, quivers, dyed hides, cloaks, flax, cotton, had a vast acreage of rice fields, extensive orchards and vineyards and a thriving pastoral sector concentrating on goats, horses and mules.[5] The Mongols could raid and seize all they needed in such a milk-and-honey land.

The news of a Mongol army in Ferghana seriously disconcerted the shah Muhammad II, who had thought that any army coming from the east would have to take a more northerly route, through the Dzungaria Gate. Here was confirmation of Jalal al-Din's opinion that the Mongols should be opposed on the eastern frontier. But already defeatism was evident at Muhammad's court. The majority wanted to abandon Transoxiana and retreat to Khorasan or the Ghazni area of Afghanistan and build an invincible stronghold against which the Mongol hordes would fling themselves in vain until fatally weakened. The shah provided no proper leadership but instead declared that Allah had told him to attack the Mongols; he ranted against Genghis as an idolater and complained to his entourage that the Mongols had 'unfairly' beaten him to the punch by invading China.[6] Yet the provocation of learning that the Mongols were laying waste Ferghana was too much to bear. Muhammad assembled a large army and marched against them.

Jochi's orders from his father were not to allow himself to be sucked into pitched battles with the shah; his role was as a diversion, to keep the Khwarezmians occupied while Genghis came through the Dzungaria Gate.[7] The headstrong Jochi never liked obeying his father's orders, and this occasion was no different. Jebe strongly urged that the Mongols should retreat, if necessary up into the foothills of the mountains, so as to lure the shah further away from Otrar, where Genghis intended to strike. Jochi took a perverse pleasure in overruling a superior general (Jebe), exercising his prerogative as a prince of the blood, saying that such a course of action would be arrant cowardice.

The sources differ in their accounts of the battle. One version is that the Mongols were in a poor state to receive the enemy after their exertions on the long trek and, instead of their usual guileful manoeuvres, simply charged the shah head on. Another is that the Mongols gave a textbook demonstration of their tactics – the light cavalry appearing to discharge their usual arrow cloud, with the heavy cavalry waiting to deliver the killer blow. It is even suggested that Muhammad came within an ace of being captured.[8] At all events, night came down on a battle that was still indecisive, but with the heavily outnumbered Mongols (perhaps 25,000 to twice that number) having outpointed the enemy in every area: speed, mobility, imagination.

This was the second time Muhammad had taken a mauling, and it reinforced what was becoming an *idée fixe* with him – that it was always folly to engage the Mongols in open battle.[9] Jebe and Jochi meanwhile followed the time-honoured tactic of withdrawing under cover of darkness, managing to take most of their cattle and horses with them. Muhammad's failure to pursue has puzzled some analysts, but at least three major factors were responsible. He was unsure of the true strength of the Mongols and could not know for certain that the army he had fought was not just a vanguard, with the main army lying in ambush, waiting for him to pursue. Then, in order to campaign effectively, the shah had to raise taxes and this in turn led to open rebellion among some already disaffected towns; to deal with these insurrections Muhammad had to divert his army from pursuit of the Mongols. Thirdly, by late summer he learned that the vanguard of another Mongol army was already pouring through the Dzungaria Gate in the north. He now had his answer. The Jebe–Jochi force had been a classic diversion.[10]

Genghis set off with the main army in May 1219, following the Orkhon and Tula Rivers.[11] Angling south-west, he crossed the Khangai Mountains through passes ranging from 8,000 to 10,000 feet and reached the Altai Mountains by mid-July. There is much scholarly wrangling about the exact route he took thereafter (geography was not the medieval chroniclers' strong point); he may have used the Dabistan-Daban Pass, though at least two other defiles in this area are open from May to September.[12] He made camp on the upper Irtysh in summer 1219, to give his men and horses rest and recreation and await the advent of his allies to this rendezvous. While encamped there, the Mongols experienced a freak summer snowstorm.[13]

To confuse the shah still further Genghis sent a small detachment (maybe 5,000 strong) on a circuitous route south to enter Turkestan by the famous Dzungaria Gate. This (on the modern China–Kazakhstan border) was already known in ancient times to Herodotus and Ptolemy and thought to be the home of Boreas, the North Wind, on account of the fierce and constant winds encountered there. Basically a small rift valley, the Dzungaria Gate is a six-mile-wide, 46-mile-long gap between the lakes Alakol and Ebi Nur, the most important mountain pass between China and Central Asia and the one gateway in a mountain wall that otherwise stretches 3,000 miles from Afghanistan to Manchuria.[14] This is the route Muhammad would have expected Genghis to take, on the expectation that he would be marching west from a base in Qara Khitai.

Meanwhile on the upper Irtysh Genghis took stock of his position and reviewed his strategy. In his retinue were Qulan, his favourite wife, his sons Tolui, Chagatai and Ogodei, and all his important generals and advisers except for Jebe and Jochi, already engaged on the western front, and Muqali in China; the most important personality of all may have been Subedei, who acted as Genghis's chief of staff and is usually credited with the brilliant strategy used against the shah.[15] (The government of Mongolia had been left to Genghis's brother Temuge.)

Quite how many troops Genghis led is a vexed question, as are all issues relating to numbers in Mongol history. Estimates range from the grotesquely impossible 800,000 to the absurdly low 80,000. The lunatic figure of 800,000 mentioned by some popular writers is implausible on a number of grounds, chiefly that this would imply also herds of 800,000 horses and 24 million sheep and goats all on the march.[16] Much depends on what figure we assign to the total population of Mongolia, and here again estimates range from 700,000 to two million. Given that the pastoral economy of Mongolia is inelastic and therefore can support only a constant population, and given also that the population of Mongolia in 1967 was three million, there is every justification for accepting the higher figure of two million in the thirteenth century.[17] This might give us a total military strength of 200,000 and take us close to some of the higher estimates.[18] Yet we must remember that large numbers of troops were still waging war in China, and that some of the newly conquered regions in Genghis's rear could not be totally counted on and needed garrisons to keep them loyal. All in all, counting allied contingents, Chinese sappers, engineers and siege experts, we might settle for a total force of 120,000 effectives, including the 30,000 under Jochi and Jebe.[19]

The most alarming news that reached Genghis at his summer camp on the upper Irtysh was that the expected Tangut contingent would not be coming. At first the campaign of 1209–10 seemed to have borne ripe fruit, for to start with Hsi-Hsia stayed loyal. There was an open usurpation of the crown in 1211 when a new ruler, Shen-Tsung, a man in his late forties, secured the throne by a coup, but he confirmed the Mongol alliance and remained steadfast until 1217. But then he repudiated all his commitments, under the influence of the virulently anti-Mongol general Asa Gambu.[20] Together ruler and general offered the Jin an anti-Mongol alliance to take advantage of Genghis's absence in the west; Asa Gambu, moreover, was convinced the Mongols would lose the war against Khwarezmia.[21]

The Jin refused, on the basis that both the Mongols and the Tangut were their sworn enemies. The Tangut had better luck with the Song, but the latter told Shenzong they could not formally commit to an alliance until 1220 at the earliest. When the Mongols officially protested at Hsi-Hsia's perfidy, Asa Gambu replied with heavy irony that since Genghis Khan styled himself the Khan of Khans (though actually he never took this title), he scarcely needed the help of the Tangut, as Heaven was already on his side.[22] When this reply was conveyed to Genghis, he is said by some sources to have become apoplectic with rage. He asked one of his secretaries to remind him at noon and dusk every day thenceforth that the treacherous Tangut realm still existed.

Soon it was time to move on, to the first target, Otrar. Genghis ordered his commissariat to make the most careful and meticulous preparations for the march ahead, factoring in all known wells, waterholes and oases. Every ten horsemen had to carry three dried sheep, with the mutton salted and dried in the sun, and an iron cauldron in which to cook the meat; similar 'slide-rule' projections were formulated for all other food. Genghis's itinerary next took him across the Irtysh, past Lake Zaysan, then, by way of the River Emil and the Tarbaghatai Mountains, and passing the eastern shore of Lake Balkhash, one of the world's great inland seas, he came to an autumn rendezvous on the plain of Qayaliq south of the lake; here he was

joined by Arslan of of the Qarluqs, Suqnaq-tigin the new ruler of Almaliq, and his great friend the *idiqut* Barchuq.[23]

Ten thousand Uighurs, 6,000 Qarluqs and a contingent from Almaliq made a hefty reinforcement; Ongud, Khitans, Solons, Kirghiz and Kem Kemjiut are also mentioned among the recruits. The allies were all much impressed with the Chinese engineers and the heavy equipment they brought for siegecraft.[24] At Qayaliq Genghis sent Chagatai ahead with the vanguard to build bridges to take them across the remaining rivers, making sure they could bear the weight of heavy transport wagons. Chagatai had many faults but he completed this task with supreme efficiency, building forty-eight timber bridges wide enough for two heavy carts to drive across side by side.[25]

The army proceeded south-west, reached the Ili River and followed it down to Almaliq, the final significant stop before their destination.[26] Passing to the north of the Lake Issyk Kul, they reached the River Chu (in today's northern Kyrgyzstan and southern Kazakhstan), the last significant obstacle before Otrar itself. Genghis gave strict orders that from now on there should be no hunting, so as not to tire the horses; he made sure food supplies were adequate, then struck due west for Otrar. Once across the Chu they were in the realms of the shah.[27]

In October 1219 the Mongols finally arrived outside Otrar on the banks of the Syr Darya, the mighty river known to the ancients as the Jaxartes. (Alexander the Great fought a famous battle on the Jaxartes in 329 BC and proclaimed it the northern limit of his empire.) Genghis had spent three months on the march, excluding stopovers on the Irtysh and elsewhere, and had covered over 2,500 miles.[28] Now he decided to leave the siege of Otrar to Ogodei and Chagatai while he waited with a large reserve force in a pass at the top of the Arys valley, in the foothills of a nearby mountain range.

As always, his strategy was masterly. Knowing that the shah was based at Samarkand, he sent 5,000 men upstream along the Syr Darya to seize Banakat (near Tashkent), where the road from Samarkand reached the river and where any army coming from that direction would have to approach.[29] He hoped to lure Muhammad into an expedition to relieve Otrar. If that happened, the 5,000 Mongols at Banakat were to leave and link up with Ogodei and Chagatai outside Otrar. Genghis's plan was to tempt the shah to imagine that the besieging army at Otrar could be caught between two fires, between his army advancing from Samarkand and the powerful garrison in Otrar, which would then sortie and assail the Mongols in the rear as they turned round to face the new army. If that happened, Genghis hoped to destroy the Khwarezmian military power in one go, using his expertise in uniting far-flung detachments of his army with lightning speed. The shah was unaware that there was a second army in the north, lurking in the foothills, and had lost sight of Jochi. With Genghis appearing unexpectedly on the flank of the sallying garrison and Jochi in the rear of Muhammad's army, the stage would be set for a victory that would echo down the centuries.[30] It would be more complete than Gaugamela, Cannae, Zama or any of the great battles of history.

But the shah would not take the bait. He was confident that the huge force of defenders at Otrar could hold out, and he wanted to be able to locate Jochi and Jebe accurately before committing himself to a clear course of action. He dithered and procrastinated, a true martial Hamlet, while his son Jalal tore his hair out that his earlier advice – to oppose the Mongols at the Syr Darya – had been rejected. In fact merely by abandoning the Syr Darya to Genghis, Muhammad had lost the first round of the struggle.[31]

There was some rationality in his decision not to endorse Jalal's plan. Since all the cities on that river (including Otrar) were on the north bank, any army defending them would have the river at its back and nowhere to escape to if defeated. On the other hand, if he used the river as a defence, defying the Mongols to cross it in the face of strong forces on the south bank, he would have to abandon all his northern cities. Moreover, even if he was victorious on the north bank, the Mongols would retreat into the mountains, and it was too dangerous to follow such a foe into that kind of terrain.[32] Muhammad's strategy therefore was to place such an enormous garrison in Otrar that the Mongols, already weary after a long march, would tire themselves out trying to take it. When he deemed that the besiegers were sufficiently exhausted, Muhammad told his advisers that he would indeed order the march from Samarkand to Banakat. This, too, was not entirely irrational. The garrison at Otrar contained no fewer than 60,000 fighting men, with the cavalry and infantry stationed all round the walls.[33]

Genghis waited patiently for two months while the siege of Otrar

dragged on, but finally concluded that the shah would never be tempted into battle. He therefore left express instructions with Ogodei and Chagatai to press the siege with all their might, assisted by Barchuq and the Uighurs, and sent orders to Jochi to advance from Ferghana and conquer all cities along the north bank of the Syr Darya.[34] Sadly for his own ambitions, Muhammad had imbibed the myth that the Mongols were hopeless at siegecraft, which his agents based on the lacklustre performance in the campaign against Hsi-Hsia in 1209–11. He had no idea that as a result of their war with the Jin the Mongols' expertise had proceeded almost exponentially, and the well-defended fortress of Otrar held no terrors for them. Inalchuq, the governor responsible for the original atrocity, and general Qaracha, sent by the shah with 50,000 men to bolster the governor's original 10,000 garrison, are said to have been caught completely off guard by the Mongol host appearing outside the walls, with the neighing of armoured horses and the braying of chain-armoured mules.[35] Naturally, the Mongols used all kinds of tricks to exaggerate their numbers. Gradually they pounded the walls and cut off all supplies of food and water. By their fierce discipline the numerically inferior nomad army triumphed over an enemy who should have been able to resist.[36]

Nonetheless, it took five bitter months of fighting before Otrar finally cracked, in February 1220. In January, Qaracha, foreseeing the inevitable end, tried to make his escape with a bodyguard but was captured and executed; Ogodei fully shared his father's belief that a general should never abandon his master.[37] After this debacle large numbers of the shah's dreaded mercenaries deserted. Some civilians, tired of the privations of a five-month siege, opened a side gate and let the attackers in, but Inalchuq, after abandoning the city to the Mongols, withdrew into the citadel with 20,000 of his crack troops; many of them soon deserted and in the end he was left with just 6,000.[38] It took another month for the Mongols to winkle them out. When the citadel fell Inalchuq and his diehard loyalists retreated into a central tower. The defenders fought bitterly and in the end, desperately short of firearms, were reduced to showering the attackers with tiles. The Mongols mined the tower and, when it collapsed, dug a still living Inalchuq out of the ruins.[39] All the Turkish deserters and any other soldiers left alive were instantly slaughtered. Ogodei and Chagatai ordered the city razed to the ground; it was never rebuilt, and its ghostly ruins attested to the folly of opposing the greatest power on earth. Inalchuq was taken and held for Genghis's pleasure whenever he should appear. He was of course executed, but the story that Genghis first tortured him by having molten silver poured into his eyes is apocryphal.[40]

With the fall of Otrar there was now no obstacle to the systematic reduction of all the cities and towns along the Syr Darya. Jochi and Jebe decided they should split up, with Jebe striking south, intending to cross the River Zerafshan and bar any southern escape route from Samarkand whenever Genghis decided to assault it. Jebe had with him somewhere between 10,000 and 20,000 men, scarcely enough to engage a large army; nevertheless when he encountered a larger Khwarezmian force, he attacked it and put it to flight. It was a great exploit but Genghis was none too happy when he heard of it. He always tried to avoid heavy casualties and to win by mobility and other indirect means.[41]

Jochi, after parting from Jebe, proceeded with the task of subjugating the Syr Darya. The first target chosen was Signak. Jochi called on the town to surrender, but the burghers responded by killing his envoy. After a tough seven-day siege, he took the town and killed all its inhabitants.[42] He pressed on to Jend, reached on 20 April 1220, but this time the citizens had the good sense to surrender; they nonetheless had to evacuate the town to allow the Mongols to plunder in peace; the sack took three days. Yanikant, just short of the point where the Syr Darya debouches into the Aral Sea, was next to fall, and there are also mentions in the sources of the seizure of smaller places named Ozkend and Asanas.[43]

Another commander, Alaq Noyan, was meanwhile operating upstream from Otrar. With 5,000 men and ably backed by his deputies Sogetu and Taqai, he invested Banakat, which held out for three days, with the defenders sortieing for a pitched battle every day, but capitulated on the fourth morning, the Turkish units having been assured that they could join the Mongol army; once disarmed they were executed en masse by showers of arrows. All civilians were drafted into the army unless they had the good fortune to be artisans or skilled craftsmen.[44]

While Alaq proceeded to take the towns of Kulab and Talikan, Chagatai and Ogodei moved down from the ruins of Otrar to besiege

the great fortress of Khujand where the Syr Darya, having till then flowed due south, turns sharply east.[45] The governor of Khujand, Temur Melik, one of the most able commanders in Khwarezmia, realised he was too weak to do anything but postpone the inevitable, so fled Ferghana's capital with a thousand-strong elite corps and ensconced himself on an island in the Syr Darya, far from both shores. There he held off Mongol attempts at amphibious warfare by using twelve fireships laden with Greek fire (an early equivalent of napalm), which inflicted heavy damage on Mongol shipping. Finally, when the food on the island ran out, Temur and his men made a break for it and tried to escape downriver. The Mongols had strung a chain across the Syr Darya at Banakat but the dauntless Temur managed to crash his way through the chain. Next he learned that the Mongols were lining the shores and that a huge army under Jochi was waiting to intercept him at Jend, having barricaded the river with an impassable barrier of boats. Quickly disembarking, he managed to find horses and with a small company set off into the wilds of the Kizil Kum.[46] Without question Temur Melik and Jalal al-Din were the most distinguished captains the shah possessed.[47] But Temur's valour availed him nothing. The Mongol conquest of the Syr Darya valley was now complete.

Genghis meanwhile seemed to have vanished into the unknown. He and Tolui took the bold decision to march across Transoxiana via the Kizil Kum, a vast desert with pyramidal sand dunes. Despite the absurd hypothesis of some writers that he went north from Otrar, looped round the top of the Aral Sea and descended on the western side of the Aral through the Kara-Kum,[48] – such an itinerary made no sense at all, does not fit the time-frame and would have been an act of utter madness – it is very clear from the sources that he struck south-west, trusting that the intelligence from his agents and local spies was good and that sufficient wells and waterholes could be located to water a large army (Genghis had perhaps 40,000 riders with him). He reached the fortress of Zarnuq, overwhelmed it, and pressed on to Nurata, still bearing south-west. Nurata had been founded as the city of Nur by Alexander the Great in 327 BC and was renowned as a Muslim place of pilgrimage. When Nurata opened its gates to him, Genghis treated it with remarkable leniency, and the explanation is almost certainly his desire not to offend Islam by desecrating one of its holy places, which would cost him the covert support of the imams of Khwarezmia and allow Muhammad to claim that he was fighting a holy war. The people and buildings were left unscathed and a merely nominal tribute exacted.[49]

Next, to the consternation of the enemy, he suddenly appeared outside the gates of Bukhara at the beginning of February 1220. The news stupefied Muhammad and he repeatedly queried whether Genghis Khan was really to the west of him, and how this could have happened. With Jochi, Ogodei and Chagatai to the north and east and Jebe to the south, he was virtually surrounded, his line turned and his communications with his western provinces all but severed. All his hopes now rested on the strong garrison he had left in Bukhara. Without question Genghis's march through the Kizil Kum to outflank the shah is one of the greatest exploits in all military history, revealing him once again as a strategist of genius. He was at the height of his powers in this war against Khwarezmia, brilliant, original, innovative, creative, richly endowed with improvisatory genius and an unparalleled instinct for reading maps and understanding spaces.[50] To quote the words of one of his most distinguished admirers, Basil Liddell Hart: 'In strategy the longest way round is often the shortest way there; a direct approach to the object exhausts the attacker and hardens the resistance by compression, whereas an indirect approach loosens the defender's hold by upsetting his balance . . . the profoundest truth of war is that the issue of battle is decided in the minds of the opposing commanders, not in the bodies of their men.'[51]

Bukhara was one of the largest cities in the Islamic world, renowned for learning and scholarship, especially Sufism; it was the sister city to Samarkand, 150 miles away to the south-east, with Samarkand the shah's political capital and Bukhara the religious one. A walled city, thirty-six square miles in area and enclosed by a great wall which the credulous claimed was one hundred miles in circuit, it was a tripartite affair. There was a citadel, one mile in circumference, an inner town, the shahristan, and outer suburbs called the rabad; the citadel was on the outside of the inner town.[52] The inner town was built on a platform and had a wall with seven gates – the Bazaar Gate, the Gate of the Spice Merchants and the Iron Gate being the most famous. As befitted the religious capital of the Khwarezmian empire, it boasted many ornate mosques, such as the Great Mosque (built in 1121), the Friday Mosque and the Mosque of the Syrians.[53] The rabad was also enclosed within a wall, this time with eleven gates. Bukhara had a brilliantly devised irrigation system with sluices, reservoirs and canals, supplying both inner and outer towns; the main canal was known as the Roud-i-zar ('the river that brings gold'), showing how important it was. The water supply was used to irrigate the many sumptuous gardens and detached houses in the wealthy suburbs, abounding with large trees that hid these residences from anyone viewing the wealthy quarter from the main minaret. Outside the great wall that enclosed Bukhara and its suburbs still more canals spiralled out, providing irrigation for land both inside and outside the city; these canals were big enough to allow boats to sail on them.[54] Less commonly remarked on were the extensive and overcrowded slums containing the urban poor, and from the feculent miasma of the narrow streets there arose the bad air and water that diminished the city's lustre.[55] The city was legendarily wealthy, deriving riches from both trade and industry; its carpets, textiles and copper work (especially beautiful copper lamps) were famous in the Islamic world, not to mention its melons. Between the citadel and the inner town, hard by the Friday Mosque a large textile factory turned out superior goods that were exported to Asia Minor, Syria and Egypt.[56]

All this, known to him from his spies within the city, Genghis pondered as he rode around the city walls, probing for the weak spots. The shah had poured troops into the city and was even then sending a relief column. Theoretically, Bukhara should have been impenetrable, but Genghis thought the acute class conflict within the city might be his entering wedge. In 1207 an artisan-led popular revolt was on the point of overthrowing the old feudal-clerical-patrician elite when Muhammad came to their aid and annexed the city.[57] Genghis hoped to use the slum dwellers as a fifth column; in any case they would be useful when it came to getting the elite to disgorge their wealth. His particular animus against the Bukhara wealthy was that in his eyes they had stolen his money, for they had bought up all the silver and jewels that Inalchuq had put up for sale after his plunder and massacre of the Mongol caravan at Otrar.[58]

There ensued a twelve-day siege. Genghis followed the usual pattern of putting his prisoners in the front rank as arrow fodder, always mindful of the casualty roster of his own men. For two days the attackers battered away without major success, but then the nerve of the Turkish commander cracked. He led his 20,000 men out in a night sortie and almost got clean away, but they were detected and pursued to the banks of the Amu Darya (Oxus), where they were massacred. At this the city surrendered, all but four hundred loyalists in the citadel. Genghis ordered the citizens to fill up the moat around the citadel, then brought up heavy catapults which breached the walls. Even so, the defenders managed to fight on for an amazing eleven days before they were finally taken and massacred. The date was variously given as 11 or 15 February, but a day-by-day count makes the 13th more likely.[60]

Genghis decided to make an example of Bukhara that would cause the rest of the shah's empire to tremble. He decreed that all merchants who bought goods from the plundered caravan at Otrar had to return them without compensation on pain of death. Moreover, all rich men, whatever their source of wealth, were to be taxed heavily. With the help of informers inside the city, Genghis identified 280 such persons (190 residents and ninety foreign traders) and mulcted them accordingly.[61] Then an order went out that all people of all ranks had to leave the city in just the clothes they stood up in, with the exception of the nubile women, who were then sacrificed to his licentious soldiery in an orgy of mass rape.[62] Young males were corralled for use as human shields in the next battle or siege, while artisans and craftsmen of note were sent to Mongolia.

Particular controversy has always attended Genghis's attitude to the religion of Islam. It is true that he executed all clerics and imams who preached against him, but the wilder canards about his behaviour are pure myth.[63] One says that he got up in the pulpit of the Great Mosque and announced that he was 'the scourge of God', another that he destroyed mosques and desecrated holy places and sacred books. Genghis would never have done anything so signally stupid as to hand the shah such an obvious propaganda weapon.[64] Better grounded is the story that he listened to a sermon on Islamic teaching in the Great Mosque, said he agreed with most of the doctrines but could not understand why pilgrims had to go to Mecca since God is everywhere.[65]

The sufferings of the people of Bukhara were nonetheless grievous; they were bullied, molested, casually murdered and, if rich, tortured

to reveal the whereabouts of hidden wealth. At least 30,000 of them died in the siege and its aftermath though, in contrast to the experience of some other cities later in the war, there was no systematic massacre or genocide.[66] As a crowning touch, a great fire swept over the city and gutted it. Hostile propagandists said that Genghis had started it deliberately, but the overwhelming probability is that it was accidental and spontaneous, since the tightly-packed wooden houses in the slums were an obvious firetrap.[67] At any rate the destruction was terrific. The great Arab historian and traveller Ibn Battuta, visiting the city a century later, found it still devastated, almost as if the Mongols had swept through the year before.[68]

Genghis now had a plentiful supply of human shields and, more importantly, the psychological upper hand. The next, and inevitable, objective was Muhammad's capital, Samarkand, where the people were severely demoralised by the fall of their sister city. For some people Samarkand had always been considered the jewel of Islamic culture, and its very geographical situation alone made it seem an oasis of civilisation. Another walled city, set on high ground, with a civilian population of 100,000, it attracted admiration, even more so than Bukhara, for its irrigation schemes and fertility. Canals striated the city, almost as though mocking the arid hills round about; as in Bukhara, there were wealthy residential suburbs and fecund orchards. Where the river left the mountains, several dams diverted its waters to irrigate the lands around the city and the districts on the north bank of the river; two of the canals flowing to Samarkand were big enough to carry boats and indeed there was a network of canals between Bukhara and Samarkand irrigating the many large towns between them. There was an enormous wall with four gates, including the China Gate to the east and, to the south, the Major Gate, the most densely populated area, where all the bazaars, caravanserais, warehouses and factories were located. Like Bukhara it was a three-stage conurbation, with citadel, inner city and outer city.[69] Oozing wealth with its plethora of artificial lakes and ponds, parks, botanical gardens and detached houses, Samarkand delighted the eye with the visual counterpoint of mosques with flowers, canals with cypress trees. It had thriving industries that turned out paper, silver and red cloth, brocade, jars and goblets, as well as more utilitarian objects like hides, stirrups and all kinds of oil and grease, including tallow.[70]

The walls were thought to be impregnable, and the shah, in residence together with his mother, had brought in his crack troops to defend it; the Arab historian Juvaini may or may not be exaggerating when he says that Muhammad had 60,000 Turks under the city's governor Tughai Khan and 50,000 Tajiks, loyal to the shah's mother Terken Qatun (Turghai's sister), in arms behind the walls.[71]

But behind the superficial confidence he exuded, or pretended to, the shah was deeply worried. The impregnability of Samarkand had been predicated on a Mongol attack *from the east* – which would have allowed it to be massively reinforced from Bukhara – but now there was no backup. He had also assumed that the Mongol army was still in its infancy as regards siegecraft, but they had battered down Bukhara as if it had been a sandcastle. Moreover, although he had a huge force of defenders at his command, Muhammad must have known that the overwhelming majority of influential oligarchs and merchants had no appetite for a fight to the death with Genghis Khan; the fall of Bukhara had made manifest the various latent and fissiparous weaknesses in the Khwarezmian empire.[72] Virtually the entire civilian population of Samarkand had been alienated from their 'emperor' a year earlier when he strengthened the wall around Samarkand but levied three years' taxes in advance to pay for the work.[73] The presence of his mother in frontal areas of the empire was another headache, especially since the Mongol campaign of disinformation and the issuing of bogus commands in her name had been spectacularly successful.[74] And the Mongol host converging on Samarkand seemed enormous. Genghis and Tolui had been joined by Ogodei and Chagatai, fresh from their triumph at Otrar; moreover, Genghis had recalled the 5,000 troops previously sent to Banakat, determined to leave nothing to chance. Additionally, the Mongols made their number seem even larger by propping up unmanned shields on the plains and placing dummies skilfully among the real soldiers.[75]

Genghis approached Samarkand slowly and cautiously, marching along both banks of the River Zerafshan, invested the city, then made a leisurely inspection of the great walls and their fortifications. The first thing to consider was that it was likely the shah had already got off a message requesting a relief column to take the Mongols in the rear. Genghis was right. Two different sets of reinforcements did appear, one an undersized force of 10,000 horsemen which took one look at the size of the Mongol army and promptly decamped, and another, 20,000 strong, which rashly gave battle and was routed in short order.[76]

All these abortive measures took time, so it was only on the third day that the Mongols began the siege in earnest. As always, the front ranks were filled with prisoners, mostly from Bukhara, who were cut down in hundreds by their compatriots. Finally Genghis ordered a mass charge at the defenders, throwing all his prisoners into the assault; they had the choice of being scythed down by the Mongols from behind or destroyed by arrows from in front. Taking massive casualties, the luckless 'volunteers' broke and fled. Sensing an easy victory over what looked like a demoralised foe, the Turkish defenders broke cover and sortied. With them went two dozen war elephants, which Tughai had claimed were his secret weapon, but which turned out to be the dampest of damp squibs. The Turks ran straight into an elaborately planned ambush conducted by the battle-fresh true Mongols, and were slaughtered in their thousands.[77] There is no need to credit the historical hyperbole of some chroniclers, whereby 50,000 perished in a single day, but it is clear that the death toll was terrific and unacceptable.

Samarkand could no longer be effectively defended. Tughai Khan and the half of the defending force that was unscathed withdrew into the inner city while the Mongols poured into the suburbs and the outer areas. The defenders' numbers were whittled down still further when the shah, reportedly accompanied by 30,000 horsemen, broke through the Mongols' ring of steel and escaped into the countryside.[78] Wretched, panicky and psychologically crushed, he admitted to his confidants that the war was already effectively over and that Genghis had won.[79]

After the great ambush and the flight of the notables, a delegation of clerics and burghers went to see Genghis, saying they were surrendering forthwith, had never wanted to fight and were always secretly on his side. They identified 50,000 members of the pro-Mongol fifth column in the city, whom Genghis promised to spare on payment of a huge fine of 200,000 gold dinars.[80] After another five days of futile resistance, the Turks and Qanglis in the inner city led by Tughai Khan asked for terms. Genghis promised they would be spared, then, once they were disarmed, slaughtered them almost to a man.[81] About a thousand doubters, who had never trusted the Mongols' word, retreated to the citadel for a last-ditch stand, but Genghis cut their water supply and then scythed them to pieces in a final assault. The date was late March 1220.[82]

Apart from those he identified as being particularly wealthy, Genghis paid no attention to the 50,000 alleged quislings unless they could pay for an 'exit visa' to leave the city. The sequel was otherwise usual and predictable. Artisans and craftsmen were sent to Mongolia; young males drafted to act as human shields in the next siege; and all nubile women raped, with the choicest specimens being reserved for the khan and his generals.[83] Genghis evinced the nomads' unsentimental attitude to animals by turning loose twenty of the war elephants (miraculously most of the pachyderms had survived the ambush) into the arid wilds around Samarkand, where they very soon perished from lack of suitable vegetation.[84]

Once all the humans he had permitted to survive had left or been taken aside, Genghis gave his men leave to kill, rape and plunder at will, and after a ten-day siege their blood was up. The devastation was enormous, as was the loss of life. Military casualties aside, of the 100,000 civilian inhabitants of Sarmarkand, only 25,000 survived to pick up the pieces in their ruined paradise once the Mongols moved on.[85] As with Bukhara, a hundred years later Ibn Battuta noticed that Samarkand had not yet recovered and still bore the marks of the conqueror. But Samarkand was lucky. Tamerlane chose it as his capital, restored the city to its former glory and even enhanced it – a particular irony, given that he fancied himself as Genghis Khan *redivivus*.[86] Meanwhile Genghis appointed a very able Khitan bureaucrat named Yelu Ahai as the new governor, with Chinese civil servants as his underlings. This turned out to be a happy choice. Whether raising taxation, maintaining postal relay stations or dispatching tribute to Mongolia, Yelu proved an inspired appointment.[87]

Genghis remained in the neighbourhood of Samarkand until May, then took his army to summer camp in the mountains to the south of the city. The court of the khan was located in Nakhshab (Qarshi), sheltered by the Hissar Mountains, the most pleasant part of Transoxiana. Genghis felt it necessary to give an extended period of rest and recreation to an army that had been at maximum exertion for almost a year since leaving Mongolia – and indeed the original corps commanded by Jebe and Jochi had been in the field far longer than that. Now that Samarkand had fallen and Muhammad was on the run, Genghis did not expect any serious opposition in the field – the fortified cities might be another matter – but he saw that it would be a mistake not to keep up the momentum.

The first of his two major initiatives at this time was an invasion of the Amu Darya basin to secure the river ready for a major offensive the next year. Curiously, the enemy seems to have thought that the Amu Darya, a wide river 1,500 miles long (an almost exact parallel of the Syr Darya) would be a major barrier to the Mongols, but they crossed it with ease, floating on wooden rafts, with themselves and their effects lashed to their horses.[88] Then began a major reconnoitre of the Amu Darya, which veterans of the China campaign thought looked remarkably like the Yellow River.[89] Traditionally the boundary between the Turks and the Persians, the Amu Darya was famous for the precious stones that abounded in its environs – rubies, lapis lazuli, rock crystals – and was navigable for the whole of its lower course in summer, though like its twin the Syr Darya, it froze over in winter. The Mongols absorbed a multitude of knowledge about the river – how it formerly used to flow into the Caspian rather than the Aral Sea, how the Transoxianians regarded it and the Syr Darya as their own (and superior) version of the Tigris and Euphrates, where the best bridging points were (with Nawidah on the right bank being the point where travellers to and from Balkh and Samarkand made the crossing).[90]

Using the elements of speed, mobility and surprise, they quickly destroyed Muhammad's fleet on the Oxus, using fireships. Then Genghis, properly briefed by his reconnaissance patrols, sent a large force under Jochi and Chagatai to besiege Termez on the north bank.[91] His two sons, who hated each other, predictably quarrelled and made a mess of the operation, which dragged on for eleven days instead of the forty-eight hours Genghis expected. The trouble began when the Mongols, overconfident, tried to seize the nearby bridge over the Amu Darya, but were repulsed, taking heavy casualties (3,000 according to some reports). Nothing enraged Genghis more than heavy loss of Mongol life and, hearing of the wrangling between his two eldest sons, in exasperation he sent Ogodei down to sort out the mess, bearing a commission as supreme commander.[92]

With the army united by Ogodei's presence, the siege was begun in earnest. The most ferocious street fighting ensued, with virtually every house becoming a defender's blockhouse – which the Mongols overcame with jars of burning oil. The attackers cut their way through the mounting rubble, the night sky lit by fire, with scenes redolent of Hieronymus Bosch's hell, complete with the stench of burning and rotting cadavers. After seven days of fighting inch by inch, the Mongols finally pinned down the defenders in the only section of town now left standing. Seeing that the struggle was hopeless, the Termezians asked for terms, but Jochi made it a point of honour that Ogodei should not grant them, so incensed was he by the mounting Mongol death toll.[93] The outcome was the usual tripartite one: enemy fighters massacred, artisans sent to Mongolia and women and children sold into slavery. The slaughter was notable for one incident that lived on in Mongol annals. A foolish old woman begged for her life and said she would give the Mongols a massive pearl if spared. When they asked where it was, she said she had swallowed it. She was cut open where she stood, disembowelled, and the pearl recovered.[94] Unfortunately, the Mongols now conceived the idea that all siege survivors might have adopted a similar strategy, so henceforth they tended to eviscerate first and ask questions later so as not to miss any swallowed treasure.

The shah meanwhile was fleeing from place to place in total panic, announcing *sauve qui peut*, telling everyone that the war was over and they should look to their own salvation. All was confusion and anarchy, and matters were not helped by a division of opinion among his counsellors. His best generals advised him to consider Transoxiana lost but recommended regrouping to defend Khorasan in the south and Iraq-Adjemi (the northern part of modern Iraq) in the west; in either of these places he could call a general muster, and maybe even patch up his differences with the caliph and proclaim a holy war against 'the Accursed One'.[95] Others advised him to make his stand at Ghazni in Afghanistan for, if defeated there, he could always retreat into India.

Muhammad initially opted for the latter course and got as far as Balkh, but there he was joined by his vizier, who talked him round to a change of plan. The vizier had his own agenda which he did not reveal. In Iraq-Adjemi, where he wanted to be based, he was under severe pressure from one of Muhammad's sons, Rukn al-Din, who had ordered him east to help his father (but really to be rid of him). Realising that his only true protection was under the shah's banner, the vizier strenuously argued for a withdrawal to the west, until Muhammad agreed.[96]

His son, Jalal al-Din, the only first-class captain the Khwarezmian empire possessed, angrily rounded on his father when he learned of his decision and described the Iraq plan as the worst possible scenario. Stop looking for redoubts, fastnesses and 'wolf's lairs', Jalal urged, muster your army, stand and fight. It was imperative, Jalal said, that the shah's people should not be able to say: 'They have collected taxes and tribute from us for so long, and now at a time like this they renounce our affairs and abandon us to be captives to infidels.'[97] The shah paid no heed whatever to this; Jalal became more and more angry and denounced him as a coward. The reality was that Muhammad did not trust either his feudal lords or his generals, and did not want to give anyone his head, lest he defeat the Mongols and then feel strong enough to turn on the shah. Thus he never committed all his troops in a once-and-for-all battle but spread them throughout his realm, enabling the Mongols to destroy them piecemeal.

His attitude so disgusted and infuriated some of his senior people in Afghanistan that they actually laid a plot to seize him and hand him over to Genghis in return for a negotiated peace. One of his ministers, Badr al-Din, forged a correspondence purportedly between Genghis and senior Khwarezmian commanders, asking for Mongol aid if they overthrew the shah, and then arranged to have copies fall into the hands of the most trusted members of Muhammad's coterie. Forewarned in the evening, Muhammad decamped quickly westwards overnight but his panic and paranoia simply grew. In the morning the pavilion where he was to have slept was found riddled with arrow holes.[98] Again Jalal begged his father to reconsider, but his case was badly weakened by the assassination attempt. Muhammad patronised his son and called his advice youthful folly, adding the supremely unhelpful observation that everything was in any case fixed by the stars and that the wise man's course was to await a favourable conjunction of the planets.[99] By now the empire was beginning to disintegrate into its erstwhile principalities, with a series of warlords trying to carve out territory for themselves, hoping to come to an accommodation with the Mongols. Most of Khorasan and Khwarezmia proper (between the Aral and the Caspian Seas) still remained astonishingly loyal to the shah, so it was to Khorasan that he fled first.[100]

Seeking to drive a wedge between Muhammad and his mother, Genghis wrote to her to say that his quarrel was only with the shah, that he disliked making war on women and that she could have a negotiated peace if she surrendered her army. Genghis realised that this force could still be extremely troublesome if it took the field against him when he invaded Khorasan. Terken Qatun was then based in Khiva in the north but proved unreceptive to the Mongol overtures. Thinking that Genghis and his armies would withdraw once they were sated with looting Transoxiana, she spurned the feelers put out to her and showed her contempt for Genghis by executing (by mass drowning) all the political prisoners she held in captivity – in other words, all the known pro-Mongol grandees in her realm.[101]

But she was soon on the run, a marked woman, as Muhammad informed her that the north, expecially Gurganj and Khiva, were the next Mongol targets. There were to be no negotiations and no mercy for the shah. Genghis assigned a force of 20,000 men to seek out and destroy him. The command of these three tumens was given to Jebe, with Subedei, his favourite collaborator, as his deputy and Genghis's favourite son-in-law Toquchar as the Number Three.[102] Their orders were plain and uncompromising. They were not to come back until Muhammad was dead or a prisoner and must pursue him relentlessly 'even if he has climbed to the sky'.[103] As for the towns and cities through which they passed on their pursuit, they were not to waste time trying to besiege the heavily fortified ones. If there was defiance from the smaller towns, they were to be sacked, but the hope was that most places would surrender. If the large cities did not acknowledge Mongol suzerainty, they were to be marked down for future destruction.[104]

Meanwhile the shah had reached Balkh on his headlong flight. He seems to have tried to anticipate Kutuzov's strategy against Napoleon in Russia in 1812 by ordering a scorched-earth policy, and exhorting his people to destroy all their crops and animals so as to deprive the enemy of sustenance. But there is no evidence in the sources that this command was ever heeded. Deserted by more and more of his troops and, for reasons of speed, accompanied only by a small bodyguard, Muhammad did not have the power to compel obedience and, besides, most of his subjects were disgusted by his cowardice and incompetence. The shah also foolishly thought that the Amu Darya would pose an insuperable obstacle to any pursuing force or that it would at least have to spend weeks building a suitable bridge for the passage of an army. Subedei and Jebe, though, found a crossing place north of Balkh where the river narrowed from a mile wide to a width of only 450 yards. This time they used a variation on the tried and tested method of so many campaigns. Instead of individual riders using horses and bladders, they constructed a gigantic flotation raft by lashing together their leather bags, and tied this to the tails of hundreds of horses, who swam across the river towing the raft.[105]

From Balkh the shah headed west through a gap in the Elburz range to Nishapur, which he reached in April 1220.[106] He sent Jalal al-Din back to Balkh to discover what he could about the Mongols' movements, but to his alarm Jalal learned that the Mongols were already at Balkh. When Jebe and Subedei approached, the city surrendered without resistance and paid the requested tribute; they simply appointed a governor to rule in Genghis's name and sped on. Jalal rode back to Nishapur to warn his father that the enemy was hot on his trail. The panic-stricken Muhammad managed to flee Nishapur just in time, lighting out for Iraq-Adjemi. He was already in a poor mental state, so paranoid and fearful of execution that he slept in a different tent each night. He left the city with a small retinue on the pretext that he was going hunting, but when the truth was learned, morale in Nishapur plummeted alarmingly.[107] Little more than twenty-four hours after his departure, Jebe and Subedei appeared outside the gates.

In contrast to the shah's dithering and lethargy, the Mongols were clocking up astonishing mileages. Riding up to eighty miles a day, they did not proceed straight to Nishapur but from Balkh went south-west to Herat then due north to Merv, to receive the surrender of these important cities.[108] Contrary to the shah's decrees, both these localities provided abundant food for the Mongol army. Faithful to Genghis's orders, Jebe and Subedei ignored any heavily defended fortresses and bypassed them. The one exception was at Zaveh (modern Turbat-i-Haidari) where the inhabitants did not just close the gates against them but stood on the walls and jeered and insulted the Mongols as they rode past. This was too much for Subedei to stomach, so he returned and besieged the fortress. After three days it fell, and Subedei took his usual grim pleasure in slaughtering the defenders to the last man.[109]

Jebe meanwhile pressed on to Nishapur, which he reached after covering 450 miles in five days. He issued Genghis's official proclamation that the city would be spared if it surrendered and paid tribute. The people of Nishapur called his bluff, replying that they were prepared to accept a Mongol governor but would not pay tribute. Shrugging his shoulders, Jebe moved on, at a slower pace, allowing time for Subedei to catch up. The next target was Tus to the north-east, one of the most famous and revered of the cities of ancient Persia, celebrated as the burial place of the great caliph Harun al-Rashid (d. AD 809) and the one-time home of Ferdowsi, the author of Iran's national epic the *Shahnameh*.[111] Prosperous and affluent, making prized striped cloth and boasting extensive orchards, turquoise mines and a sophisticated irrigation system, Tus had often been a target for invaders, and had been captured by Alexander the Great in 330 BC. Perhaps the wealth had bred arrogance and hubris, for when Subedei sent in the usual formulaic demand for surrender, it was rejected in the most insolent terms. Subedei was the wrong man to cross in this way. He burst into the city with his horde and gave in to his usual habit of mass execution and slaughter.[112]

Again Jebe and Subedei split up and again Subedei indulged his passion for sacking cities. From Tus he proceeded north-west to Esfarayen and then south-west to Damghan, looting and pillaging both places. It turned out that this was the exact route Muhammad had taken when fleeing from Nishapur (when he had temporarily given the Mongols the slip).[113] Jebe struck west through Mazandaran province just to the south of the Caspian and sacked the towns of Amol and Asterabad (Gorgan) on the southern coast of the Caspian. The province contained the most diverse habitat: arid plains, prairies, rainforests, sandy beaches on the shore of the Caspian and the snow-capped Alborz sierras.

The shah had fled to Rayy with Jalal al-Din but, hearing that the Mongols were closing in on him, divided his family, sending one section to the fortress of Qarun and other to the fastness of Ilal. At Ilal was the formidable Terken Qatun, the shah's mother.[114] Ilal should have been a safe haven, as it was at high altitude with a plentiful water supply. But it so happened that the Mongol incursion into Mazandaran coincided with a freak drought. Parched with thirst, the defenders surrendered to Jebe after a fifteen-day siege. Jebe sent Terken Qatun and the rest of Muhammad's harem to Genghis at his winter base in Talaqan. He ordered all male children of the shah, no matter how young, to be put to death. Chagatai took two of the most attractive daughters of the shah as his concubines, and the rest of the harem was distributed to senior officers. Terken herself was sent as a captive to Karakorum in Mongolia, where she lived miserably until her death in around 1233.[115] But before that Genghis had a final humiliation in store for her. She and the captive women from the family of the shah and Jalal were forced to walk ahead of the Mongol troops bareheaded, lamenting publicly the downfall of Muhammad's empire, so that all viewing the spectacle should heed the folly of opposing God's will and thus absorb the awful message.[116]

Subedei and Jebe then reunited at Rayy, 450 miles from Nishapur and the largest city in Iraq-Adjemi, famous throughout the Orient for the export of silk fabrics and 'beautiful polychrome ceramics, decorated with exquisite miniatures'.[117] Rayy was taken completely by surprise. The Mongols suddenly appeared in the suburbs and came sweeping into the city, avid for killing and plunder, long before the inhabitants could muster any kind of defence. After a thorough sack of Rayy, the women and children were enslaved.[118] Jebe and Subedei then cut a swathe of destruction south-west to Hamadan before being brought up short by news that the shah was to be found to the north-west, at Rasht in the province of Gilan (another littoral region of the Caspian). Near Hamadan occurred the one and only real pitched battle between the Mongols and the shah's troops. Jebe's forces won easily and brushed aside the last obstacle between them and their quarry.

The defeat hammered another nail into Muhammad's coffin, for the vanquished forces dispersed in anarchy. Hungry and desperate, they rampaged and marauded throughout the countryside, making themselves even more feared and unpopular than the Mongols. Muhammad fled from Rasht at the Mongols' approach and reached the province of Qazvin, where Jalal had assembled an army of 30,000. On paper this should have given him the strength to turn around and face Jebe and Subedei with some confidence, but by this time rationality had long been conquered in the shah's psyche by panic and paranoia; a broken man, he had just one instinct – to flee.

In desperation he opted to try to escape to the caliph in Baghdad and got as far as Hamadan to the west. On the way there he was overtaken by the Mongols, who, incredibly, failed to recognise him. Spotting a column of stragglers, whom Jebe took to be refugees, he allowed his men cynically to loose a shower of arrows in their direction, one of which struck and wounded Muhammad's horse.[119] The valiant steed limped on and managed to convey its useless master to the gates of Qarun.

The shah's vizier suggested that he retreat farther north into the Caucasus, where he could raise tens of thousands of Kurdish mercenaries. Muhammad suspected this this advice was really about using him as a pawn so that the vizier could knock out the political opposition in his own province. Besides, he objected, if he raised taxes to finance fresh troops, new rebellions would break out; to deal with these he would have to disperse his troops, so he would be back to square one. Yet another reason for the impossibility of confronting the Mongols with a single powerful army was that all the component tribes in his empire hated each other and had only been prevented from being at each other's throats before 1219 by his own record of victories; even in the garrisons in the fortified cities, the battalions had to be of equal tribal strength to prevent bloodshed.[120]

With his men now deserting him in ever greater numbers, Muhammad did not stay long in Qarun but gained a day on his pursuers by having it bruited around that he was still there when in reality he had long departed.[121] Once alerted by a spy that they were on a fool's siege, the Mongols sped on. To slow them down, the shah sacrificed his rearguard, who perished heroically. Pursuing an erratic track through the province of Gilan and the town of Amol, he finally took advice from his emirs who urged him to find a refuge on one of the islands of the Caspian. For once Muhammad took a snap decision and embarked; it was well for him that he did, for he just managed to push off from the shore when his craft was pinpricked with a shower of Mongol arrows.[122]

Even when he was on the open sea and free (for the moment) from pursuit, the miserable Muhammad could not relax. He insisted on moving from island to island. At first he was on Ab-i-Sugun but moved on to Ashuradeh and later an island near Abaskun. This was a smart move, for a few days later the Mongols launched an amphibious attack on Ab-i-Sugun only to find the bird flown.[123] Half out of his mind with anxiety, paranoid, suspicious, jumpy, by now dressed in rags, Muhammad additionally suffered from pleurisy and diarrhoea. He began to rant and rave and told the faithful few followers who still remained to him that he wanted to return to Khwarezmia 'to begin again'. He paid for his sustenance and the costs of his men by issuing land deeds to the islanders which, almost a decade later, they presented to Jalal for payment; amazingly he honoured the IOUs.[124]

In a lucid moment he revoked the gift of succession he had made to his son Uzlaq-Shah and announced that Jalal al-Din was now his heir. This angered his courtiers, for Uzlaq was a paper tiger they could dominate easily, but Jalal was an entirely different proposition, a natural autocrat, talented general and shrewd politician. He said to Jalal: 'When men become distracted about their own affairs . . . it will be better that the thread of life be severed.'[125] Finally seized by pneumonia, he died on 10 January 1221 and was buried on the island.[126] So great was his destitution that Jalal could not even find a winding sheet to bury him in, so he was interred in his day clothes. Some time later Jalal removed his father's remains to an island fortress, but the Mongols learned of this, exhumed the bones and burned them.[127]

By his incompetence and cowardice during the Mongol invasion Muhammad lost all the kudos he had obtained as ruler of Khwarezmia. The Arab historian Ibn al-Athir was, however, prepared to praise him. He said that he was brave, stoical, learned and educated, well versed in law and theology and respectful to imams.[128] His total failure contrasted with the glittering success achieved by Jebe and Subedei, which drew Genghis's appreciative praise. The one blemish on the great Mongol raid was the disgraceful performance of Toquchar. Warned by Genghis before he set out not to loot and pillage on his own account, Toquchar disregarded his father-in-law's words. For this egregious offence, Genghis reduced him to the ranks and ordered him into the thick of fighting as a common soldier.[129] Yet, though the shah was dead, the Mongols had merely scotched the Khwarezmian snake, not killed it. There remained much more hard fighting and many more hundreds of thousands of deaths before Genghis could declare the war at an end.

11

The Khwarezmian Empire Destroyed

While Jebe and Subedei relentlessly harried the doomed shah, Genghis, in ignorance of the rapid sequence of events, targeted the realm of Khwarezm, the heartland of Muhammad's domains, as his next objective. Whereas Samarkand and Bukhara were late additions to the shah's infant empire, Khwarezm – the Amu Darya delta region, the area bounded on the north by the Aral Sea, to the east the Kizil Qum Desert, the south by the Kara Qum Desert and the west by the Ustyurt Plateau (and today at the crossroads of Uzbekistan, Kazakhstan and Turkmenistan) – was its heartland. Intensely loyal to Muhammad and his family, it was where his mother had had her power base.[1]

Determined to complete the 'blooding' of his sons in difficult campaigns, Genghis intended to remain aloof from the actual fighting and in the autumn of 1220 sent Jochi north instead, telling him that Khwarezm was to be part of his ulus. He himself remained at Qarshi (Nasaf), with headquarters at the Nakhshab oasis, moving slightly upstream to Sali Sarai in the winter of 1220–21. Always inclined to forgive a favourite, he decided to blot out Toquchar's earlier disobedience when he looted and pillaged, took him out of his humiliating position in the ranks and raised him to command once more. Toquchar's task was to ensure that no enemy troops escaped south from Khwarezm to Khorasan.[2] But the attack on Khwarezm itself and its great capital Gurganj he assigned to Jochi.

As a prelude he sent one Taynal Noyan with 20,000 men to advance towards Gurganj and take out the city of Khiva en route. This force proved much more successful than Jochi's main army that followed in its wake. First, in early December 1220, it took Khiva after a bloody and strenuous seven-day siege followed by savage street fighting.[3] Then the Mongols rode the hundred or so miles north-west of Khiva to Gurganj itself, where they almost managed to end the campaign before Jochi had even arrived. Using one of their favourite ruses, they sent a small body of horsemen to drive off cattle under the very gates of the city. Naturally the men of Gurganj at once sallied in strength and pursued. The Mongols cunningly drew the pursuers away from the city, feigning a panic-stricken flight, and led them into an ambush. The ensuing battle was grimly fought from early morning to noon, but ended in complete victory for the Mongols. The pursuers became the pursued and fled back to the city, entering by a side gate. The Mongols followed them into the suburbs, but were not in sufficient strength to overcome the numerous defenders or gain a decisive advantage, so withdrew.

Two days later Jochi arrived with the main army.[4] He was anxious to spare both the city and the province massive destruction, since this was his own ulus, but a letter explaining this and counselling peaceful submission was returned with an insulting reply by the burghers of Gurganj.[5]

Gurganj was an immensely wealthy city and its beauty was praised by the famous Arab geographer and biographer Yakut al-Hamawi (1179–1229). The wealth derived from many sources: its position as a nodal point on the caravan routes; a thriving slave trade, an agricultural sector producing cotton, cereals, fruit, grapes, currants, sesame, honey, hazelnuts and other foodstuffs, a manufacturing base turning out bows, arrows, swords, cuirasses and other armaments, a luxury trade in amber, falcons, carpets and brocades of silk and cotton and, perhaps most of all, its famous commerce in Russian furs (marten, sable, fox, squirrel, stoat, ermine and weasel) as well as domestic pelts of horses, goats and wild asses.[6] Quite apart from the personal loyalty to Muhammad's family, the inhabitants had assets worth fighting for. From the Mongol point of view the city was the most difficult of nuts to crack, for all the approaches were plashy, marshy and foetid – one consequence of the fact that the Amu Darya, which formerly flowed into the Caspian Sea, by the thirteenth century emptied instead into the Aral.[7] Attackers not only had to approach over mudflats and marshlands but faced the serious problem that the terrain was void of all large stones necessary for siege engines; the Mongols solved that one by chopping down mulberry trees and hewing the wood into circular 'stones' for use in their catapults. However, this proved a temporary expedient only. The wooden missiles turned out to be ineffective against the thick and massive walls of Gurganj, so Jochi had to order real stones from distant areas to be laboriously transported there in carts.[8]

Jochi rode all round the walls, taking careful note of the landscape and any weaknesses in the defence. He also had good intelligence about the state of affairs inside the city. Once again the endemic factionalism of the Khwarezmian empire was playing into the Mongols' hands. Temur Melik, after his earlier daring escape from the enemy, made his way to Gurganj and tried to rally the people but soon gave up, discouraged and depressed by the incessant intrigues in the military high command.[9] Then, after the shah's death in January 1221, Jalal al-Din and his followers crossed the Caspian to the Mangishlaq peninsula and cut east to Gurganj. Jalal fared no better than Temur Melik and beat his head in vain against the intense – and insane in the light of the threat from the Mongols – factionalism. Jalal found himself unable to rally the powerful coterie centered around Uzlaq-Shah the former crown prince, notably the emirs of the north, who had always hated Jalal. When Uzlaq and his men tried to assassinate Jalal – and failed narrowly only because the plot was betrayed at the last minute – Jalal abandoned Gurganj as a hopeless case. He and his brothers took off east across the Kara-Kum Desert.[10] Jolted into sense by Jalal's departure, the feuding cliques finally made common cause and appointed a general named Khumar Tegin as their sultan.

Jochi pressed the siege hard, using prisoners in the front line to soak up the casualties, and employing siege engineers brought from China. He also tried to divert the river and cut off the water supply but the first 3,000 men he sent on this task were ambushed by a sortie from the defenders and badly mauled. At this reverse the defenders took heart and morale rose.[11]

Meanwhile Genghis was fretting and fuming about the continued lack of good news from Jochi. In an evil hour he decided to send Chagatai to the siege with a considerable reinforcement; predictably Jochi was enraged both by the implication that he was incompetent and at the salt-rubbing implicit in the dispatch of the hated Chagatai. Equally predictably, Genghis's two eldest sons clashed violently from the moment of their first encounter. Chagatai accused Jochi of a 'softly-softly' approach dictated solely by the fact that Gurganj was his appanage, and that he was sacrificing wider Mongol interests to his own ambition.[12] The two soon exemplified the old adage that the only fun in war is to be had from fighting your own side. Bo'orchu, who had been sent by Genghis to be his eyes and ears and a steadying influence on Jochi and whose record at Gurganj was most distinguished, reported to Genghis that instead of concentrating on the siege, his two sons were battling each other.

One canard was that Jochi challenged Chagatai to a wrestling match and that the bout had actually started when Bo'orchu heard of it. He rushed to the spot to intervene, and was able to part the combatants only when he revealed a plenipotentiary 'to whom it may concern' note from Genghis, ordering all who heard it to obey Bo'orchu as they would the great khan himself. But it was certain that the slanging match between the brothers did escalate to the point where their supporters clashed violently and there were deaths on both sides.[13]

When he learned this, Genghis's anger was seismic. On this campaign he had already had to endure open quarrels between the two in his own presence. Qulan urged him to cut through and settle the succession then and there, in case any accident should befall him. Genghis took her advice and nominated Ogodei as his successor. He then sent Ogodei to Gurganj as commander-in-chief, with strict orders to his two elder sons to accept the succession and to obey Ogodei in all things; Ogodei brought with him a further 20,000 men.[14] Chagatai seems to have been well content that the detested Jochi would not inherit the empire and anyway he liked and admired Ogodei. Jochi, though, was secretly furiously angry. In his mind he had been insulted twice over: he had been replaced as commander at Gurganj and now had been deprived of his birthright. His secret hatred of Genghis grew. Yet Ogodei was a good choice as supremo. Cast down both by their inability to put a dent in the walls of Gurganj and by the feuding and altercation of Jochi and Chagatai, the Mongols began to droop in morale and commitment: Ogodei put the steel back into them.[15]

His first move was to renew the attempt to divert the Amu Darya and deprive the defenders of water, though spies told him such a strategy would be hugely protracted, since the people of Gurganj had already dug wells and laid in a huge water reserve. But Khumar Tegin was by now beginning to quail at the enormous, and continually augmented, number of besiegers and by Ogodei's new artillery tactics that involved hurling naphtha at the city walls. He put out feelers asking for terms, but the enraged burghers learned of this, repudiated the overtures and deposed Khumar.[16]

Although the burghers of Gurganj were determined to fight on, slowly but surely the initiative passed to the Mongols, as every day that passed made the besiegers seem stronger and stronger. Ogodei ordered his prisoners forward to fill in the moats. It took them ten days to do so, taking terrible casualties all the time, but Ogodei was now able to get close up and sap and mine all along the walls. Finally, he sensed a weakening in the pulse of the defenders and ordered an all-out attack. While naphtha rained down on the city in an unceasing barrage, a Mongol commando unit managed to establish a toehold on the walls and planted their standards triumphantly there.[17] Using this bridgehead as a wedge, the Mongols gradually fought their way into the city, but the desperate defenders disputed every step. It took seven days of the most brutal, slugging streetfighting, hand to hand and house to house, before Ogodei's men broke the Gurganjians' will.

Finally in April 1221, exhausted, they asked for terms, their envoy adding that his people had now had enough of the Mongol lash. A furious Jochi, remembering the heavy losses taken by his 3,000-strong river-diverting party, replied that on the contrary up till now it was the Mongols who had tasted the lash, but that Gurganj was now about to get a taste of it.[18] Surrender terms were agreed. Every last person was ordered out of the city. Artisans were taken off to stand on one side, but all others were corralled into a killing ground, women and children included, except for a few comely wenches who were taken into concubinage or slavery. The massacre then began. There is no need to believe the hyperbole of some medieval chroniclers who said that each Mongol was given the task of killing twenty-four people, but there is also no reason to doubt that the slaughter was terrific. As a further refinement, the Mongols first made the women strip naked and fight each other with fists for the amusement of their troops. When they tired of the spectacle, they moved in and killed them all.[19]

The victors then thoroughly sacked the city, gutted it and, as a *pièce de résistance*, flooded it by opening the dykes inside the city that controlled the waters of the Amu Darya – though some claimed that the dykes

spontaneously (and very conveniently) burst. A veritable tsunami engulfed the town. All buildings were destroyed and the hapless refugees who had tried their luck by hiding in them were drowned. It was said that, whereas in Mongol sacking of cities there were usually a handful of escapees, in Gurganj not a single soul escaped destruction.[20]

Ogodei and his brothers followed up the massacre at Gurganj with a wholesale laying waste of all Khwarezm. The total devastation of the province certainly made it impossible for Jalal or any of the shah's erstwhile followers to use the region as a rallying point, but in the process most economic life there ceased also; it was only later that the Mongols realised that it was more sensible to keep people alive so that they could work and be taxed rather than slaughter them.[21] Meanwhile the holocaust at Gurganj seemed to observers to have inaugurated an entirely new era and dimension of horror – an impression that would only be strengthened by the other mass killings to come, which would make 1221 a year to live in infamy. In the Arab world Genghis was beginning to be known by what would become a familiar piece of nomenclature: 'the Accursed One'. As Ibn al-Athir said of the destruction of Khwarezm: 'Nothing like this had ever been heard of in ancient or modern times.'[22]

Genghis of course cared nothing for his reputation. What concerned him was that his sons had made such heavy weather of the siege of Gurganj, had taken five months to accomplish it, and then only after two lots of pump-priming with reinforcements.

Meanwhile his favourite Toquchar had once again disappointed him. He began well by taking the town of Nisa but was then outwitted by Jalal al-Din, who emerged from the desert of Kara-Kum, fell on the garrison of seven hundred warriors Toquchar had left at Nisa, and cut his way through; Toquchar's two brothers were killed in the fighting.[23] By forced marches Jalal reached Nishapur and pressed on to Ghazni in eastern Afghanistan. To try to save face Toquchar made a rash attempt to take Nishapur, but his troops were driven off and he himself was killed in the fighting. His deputy, Borkei, tried to pick up the baton but he too was checked at Nishapur and had to console himself with the much lesser target of Sabzawar after a three-day siege.[24] At news of Toquchar's death, Genghis forgot the long litany of his failures and grieved excessively, telling his confidants that Nishapur would pay dearly for that day's work.

He was jolted out of his angry mourning by further bad news from Gurganj. It turned out that, after looting the city, Ogodei, Chagatai and Jochi had simply divided the immense loot between them, omitting to send the khan his customary tithe. From anyone else but his sons such an action would be high treason and, in the immediacy of his wrath, Genghis actually toyed with the idea of executing the three reprobates, as he termed them.[25] When they returned to court, he refused to receive them in audience for three days and kept them dangling in a limbo of uncertainty. It fell to Bo'orchu and Shigi Qutuqu, in concert with the three 'quiver bearers', to talk Genghis down from his homicidal rage. They argued that he was being much too harsh on them, for they were simply rash and headstrong young men, 'like young falcons about to enter training'. Gradually Genghis was won round. When he finally calmed down, he acknowledged the wisdom of his counsellors' advice and promoted all of them to even higher offices in gratitude for their efforts.[26]

After resting his horses and reserves for most of 1220, Genghis decided that the priority for 1221 was the pursuit of Jalal al-Din into Afghanistan. He intended to cross the River Vakhsh into the Hindu Kush near Baghlan, with the fortress of Talikan as his next major objective, and it therefore made sense for him to accompany Tolui as far as Balkh, the Mongols' first target in Khorasan. In January 1221 he crossed the Amu Darya at Termez, which had already fallen, but was wrong-footed when a deputation arrived from Balkh to say that the citizens would submit and offer no resistance.[27]

Genghis advanced and surveyed the city. Its houses of sun-dried bricks were watered by an intricate irrigation system, which also fed the rich vineyards, orchards and fields of sugar-cane in the environs. An important religious centre – some called it the Mecca of Persia – Balkh boasted three concentric walls and thirteen gates and its wealth made it a constant target for marauders; apart from the Mongols there were the Turkish nomads who sacked it in 1155, while Tamerlane would destroy it once more in 1389.[28] It seemed to Genghis that he could not leave such a rich and populous city in his rear when he turned east to deal with Jalal, so he decided to break his own rules and ignore the peaceful submission.

It is important to realise that Genghis was permanently obsessed with the Mongols' paucity in numbers and hence with casualty lists.

In his mind it was the merest realism to reduce the numerical odds against himself by the massacre of all who would not surrender; this was the method he had employed against Tayichiud, Tartars, Merkit, Kereit, the Jin and all other enemies; there were never to be any prisoners unless they could be used as arrow-fodder.[29] Genghis always allowed pragmatism to trump concerns of humanity, so the luckless people of Balkh paid the price. He ordered all citizens of property to emerge from the city, ostensibly to assess the taxes they should pay to their conquerors, then massacred them all, thereby, in his mind, destroying any possible focus for future rebellion.[30] He salved what passed in Genghis for a conscience by not ordering the killing of every single soul, which was his normal practice when a city refused to surrender, and contented himself with a 'routine' sack of the city.

He and Tolui then parted, he to Afghanistan, Tolui to complete the conquest of Khorasan. Before he left, Genghis gave explicit and chilling orders for his youngest son. If there was the slightest resistance in the major cities, Tolui was to kill everyone without exception. If the burghers surrendered, Tolui was to use his best judgement about how to proceed, always bearing in mind the crucial factor of numbers.[31] The task Genghis gave Tolui was no easy one. Khorasan was a long series of steppes where only the occasional grove of elms or poplars grew, punctuated by fertile oases, ending in a desert at the heart of the Persian plateau. Life was hard and, outside the major conurbations and oases, almost impossible, for it was only the complex irrigation systems that sustained the orchards,, vineyards, and fields of rice and millet, to say nothing of the ornate gardens in the big cities.

Exulting in his unfettered command, Tolui decided to strike north-west and invest Merv, which his spies had reported on to his fascination. Allegedly one of the largest cities in the world at the time, an architectural showpiece, with an estimated population of around 200,000, and reckoned second in importance in the shah's empire only to Bukhara, Merv was another of those urban centres with over-determined sources of wealth.[32] The city of the *Arabian Nights*, an important oasis on the lower River Murghab and situated on a fertile plain, it was famed for its exports of silk, cotton and cloth, for its ceramics, fine fabrics and carpet-making. It stood at the nodal point of the Silk Route, with roads striking north-west to Nisa (near modern Ashgabat), due west to Asterabad (Gorgan) on the Caspian Sea, due north to Khiva (Khwarezm), south through Herat to the Persian Gulf and south-west via Nishapur to Iraq-Adjemi and Mesopotamia. The Silk Route itself was already the conduit for goods from Byzantium, India and the Arab caliphate (under the later Mongol empire Russia and Europe would be added).[33] With its plethora of weavers, potters and brass-makers, Merv was a magnet for all the caravans of the Orient and the Middle East, and it was famous too for containing the tomb of the sultan Sanjar, whose turquoise-blue dome could be seen from a great distance.

Yet what most bedazzled Tolui was its altogether miraculous irrigation system.[34] South of the city the River Murghab was prevented from changing course by dykes and embankments faced with wood work. Three miles south of Merv the river's waters were impounded in a great round pool, whence four canals radiated to the various quarters of the city and the suburbs, with the height of water in the pool controlled by sluices. At high flood time the dams were cut and the waters divided according to set rules, and this was the occasion for a festival of thanksgiving.[35] Tolui was particularly intrigued that the irrigation system was under the control of a special official, the *mir-ab*, said to have more power than the city prefect. He employed 12,000 men in the maintenance of dykes and the regulation of the water supply, and even had a team of three hundred divers, each of whom had to keep a supply of timber to repair the dykes. On the embankment was a gauge which regulated the flood height. In a year of abundance this rose to 'sixty barleycorns' above low level, but in a year of drought only six. The *mir-ab* was at the apex of an entire hydraulic hierarchy. He was responsible for the main canals, officials known as *bandbans* (aka *varkbans*) for the dams and divers, *juybans* (supervising the offtake canals) and *ab-andazs* (water measurers), in charge of the release of water from the upper reaches of the river.[36] The collective labour carrying out the irrigation work was known as the *hashar*.[37] The Mongols, and especially Tolui, were far from mindless; they learned from this system and later, as imperial overlords, themselves built many huge dams and irrigation works in Iran and Central Asia.[38]

Nonetheless, greatly as he admired the ingenuity of the people of Merv, it was Tolui's duty to destroy the entire intricate edifice unless Merv surrendered promptly. It did not. When Subedei and Jebe appeared before the city during their pursuit of the shah, the citizens seemed divided in their response to the Mongols. Muhammad had ordered all the troops inside the walls to retreat to the nearby fortress of Maragha and advised the burghers to submit. But the generals felt insecure in Maragha, and they and their men drifted back to Merv, strengthening the anti-Mongol faction. The peace party, also powerful, was led by the mufti but he was discovered to be a fifth columnist for the Mongols and executed.[39] Subedei and Jebe tried to lure Merv into submission by lavish promises and cajolery but the war party tortured their envoys, who revealed the Mongols' intended treachery before being executed. When Jebe and Subedei, obedient to their orders, did not tarry but pressed on in pursuit of the shah, the citizens grew complacent and overconfident; they were thrown into consternation by the approach of Tolui with a large army. Contemporary chroniclers estimated the Mongols at 70,000 strong – an absurd exaggeration – but Tolui's host was large enough to be frightening, especially as there was a large number of drafted prisoners in the ranks.[40]

Tolui began briskly by luring 10,000 crack Turkish troops into an ambush and demolishing them. Next day he made a tour of Merv's defences and thought the city vulnerable. But the war party still had the upper hand within and staged two sorties, easily swatted away.[41] After a week the defenders asked for terms and sent a deputation to Tolui. He promised that no one would be killed and there would be no looting if the citizens surrendered promptly. Cunningly he asked to see a second deputation composed of all the leading citizens and, once he had them in his power, had them garrotted, but not before they had revealed the names of the two hundred richest men.[42] Tolui issued a decree declaring that all who wished to surrender must leave the city with their effects; all artisans and the two hundred identified plutocrats were to received special treatment. After an exodus which is said to have taken four days, Tolui surveyed the masses dolefully gathered with their possesions, mounted a golden chair and ordered mass execution to commence.[43] Every last person who had come out onto the plain was slain. The soldiers from the garrison were beheaded, and each Mongol allegedly had a quota of four killings to complete. One report said the massacre went on for four days and nights. The two hundred plutocrats were then tortured to reveal the whereabouts of their wealth.

Next Merv was sacked and gutted and the irrigation system eviscerated. The mausoleum of sultan Sanjar was demolished in hopes of finding treasure there, and the city walls and citadel razed to the ground.[44] From the beginning of the siege to Tolui's departure three terrible weeks had elapsed. Thinking the Mongols had departed, some 5,000 survivors who had gone into hiding crawled out of cellars and secret passages and emerged onto the rubble, only to be cut to pieces by returning Mongol squadrons. Some said that Tolui had a shrewd suspicion that not all the Mervians had perished; others that the survivors were just plain unlucky, in that a rear detachment, slow to quit the city, just happened to see them as they emerged from their underground bolt-holes.[45]

One unintended consequence of the destruction of Merv was that a clan of Turkish Oghuz pastoralists, who had sacked Balkh in 1153 and liked to graze their herds near Merv, were so terrified of the Mongols' advent that they decamped west in panic, made their way to Asia Minor and eventually founded Turkey's Ottoman dynasty.[46] Yet another was that those people who had managed to escape Merv before the Mongols' final onslaught and had fled to nearby villages or the desert now swore revenge, formed themselves into guerrilla groups and harassed Tolui severely on his line of march.[47]

Before turning south to Nishapur, Tolui detached a sizeable corps of his army and sent it to attack ten-gated Nisa, the most northerly city of Khorasan on the southern edge of the Kara-Kum Desert and the northern slopes of the Kopet Dagh Mountains, where the green vegetation around the town contrasted sharply with the black sandy desert of nearby Turkmenistan. It will be remembered that Nisa had fallen to Toquchar in 1220 but that the garrison he had left there had then been overwhelmed by Jalal al-Din and his army. In the course of the fighting one of Tolui's close friends, Borke, had been killed by an arrow. Tolui was determined to avenge his old comrade.

The Mongols adopted their usual formation: prisoners in front to absorb the missiles of the defenders and twenty catapults raining missiles above their heads against the walls. After fifteen days the trebuchets made a large breach in the walls, the Mongols poured in during a night attack and became masters of the city within hours. All the inhabitants were driven out onto the plain and ordered to tie the hands of the next person to them behind their backs. Then they

were all – men, women and children – dispatched with arrows. The figure of 70,000 slain in Nisa and the northern provinces given in some contemporary chronicles may not be too far from the truth.[48]

The route from Nisa to Nishapur ran almost directly south, and the victorious Mongols hastened to catch up with Tolui who proceeded in leisurely fashion from Merv to Nishapur, taking twelve days.[49] Tolui was under orders from Genghis to wreak a terrible vengeance for the death of Toquchar, but Mongol credibility in general was also at stake, as Nishapur had repelled Toquchar's powerful army in November 1220 and attitudes there seemed to have hardened since the city behaved politely to Jebe and Subedei on their way past earlier in pursuit of the shah.[50]

Whereas Tolui, ever the practical man of action, could see the importance of Merv's irrigation scheme, the glories of Nishapur largely left him cold. Famous as the city of the great poet and polymath Omar Khayyam, renowned for its religious scholars and as a centre of Sufism, Nishapur was another wealthy city, with its fields of rice and cereals, its carpet-making and distinctive ceramics, its cotton factories, glass-blowing, manufacture of metal and stone vessels and musical instruments, the turquoise mines in the suburbs, its sumptuous houses, exquisite gardens and general opulence. Possibly the most beautiful city in all Iran and certainly in Muhammad's empire, Nishapur was a watery delight, with twelve canals and seventy watermills bringing the precious liquid to a population of some 170,000.[51] It had been destroyed twice in historical memory, once by the Oghuz Turks in 1153 and more recently, in 1208, by a calamitous earthquake, but poor Nishapur can have had little conception of the hell that was now to descend on it. Once the citizens saw the size of Tolui's army, they sent envoys, both imams and oligarchs, to ask for terms, but Tolui was constrained by Genghis's rage over Toquchar and his code of vengeance, so could offer them nothing. In any case the Nishapurians had done themselves no favours since, before Tolui's arrival, they had been attacking Mongol outriders and scouting parties. The ferocity of the Mongol onslaught was such that, though better defended than Merv, it lasted just three days, as against Merv's three weeks.[52]

The battle for Nishapur (April 1221) began with a furious cannonade from both sides. Nishapur's defences included 3,000 javelin-throwing ballistae and 500 catapults, against which the Mongols brought to bear